

Bad Case of Loving You



Laney Cairo

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Prologue

"Hey, Mattie!" someone shouted across the crowded bar. I waved a hand at the group of familiar faces, but kept on pushing my way through the crowd.

It was a good night; the bar was packed and loud, music booming down the far end, lights strobing in time with the music, but I wasn't there to dance, either. This was my last night of freedom before classes started again, my last chance before the final semester of my medical degree to get really, thoroughly laid, and I didn't plan to go home alone.

There were some hot guys there. I bought a lager and found a place near the dance floor to have a really good look around. I was wearing my cuff, just to make sure whoever I picked up knew.

It took a little bit of time, and I shook my head at a couple of the men who cruised past me, but the man with the goatee caught my fancy, and when he brushed past, I snaked my hand out and caught his wrist.

This was the test. If he pulled away and scowled at me, then he wasn't right.

He didn't pull away; instead he let me tug him across so he was pressed against me, his shoulder against mine, and I leaned forward and pressed my face against the side of his shaved head.

He smelled good, of beer and cologne, and he said, "Want to get it on?"

Outside the pub it was raining, and I zipped up my jacket. "You got a place?" he asked, and I nodded.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"This way."

It was only a couple of streets. He walked along beside me, solidly built in his leather jacket, and I said, "My name's Matthew."

"Jake," he said, and I indicated with my head that the house with the booming stereo was mine.

The housemates were sprawled in the living room, draped over couches and on the floor, eating pizza and sinking lagers, and I ignored their craned heads and partly audible whistles, and led Jake up the stairs.

My room was stark, just a mattress on the floor, a pile of textbooks, and a wardrobe with my few clothes stuffed in it, but Jake didn't say anything, just began to take his clothes off as soon as I'd slid the bolt on the door shut.

Jake stripped off quickly, revealing a solid body with close-cropped body hair which was pleasantly bristly to touch when I ran the palm of my hand across his chest. He was hard already, thick-cocked and tempting, and I dropped my jacket on the floor and dragged my T-shirt over my head.

He made a pleased sound at my nipple piercings, and I smiled knowingly and unzipped my jeans.

"Oh, yeah," he whispered, dropping to his knees in front of me.

I had condoms in my back pocket, and I fished one out and ripped it open. It took a little bit of work to roll the latex over the beads of my apadravya piercing, but I'd had plenty of practice, and there was a knack to it. Top bead first, then hold the bar steady with my other thumb and slide the latex over the bottom bead, and then down my cock.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Jake was endearingly keen, taking all of me in at once, eyes closed, and I let him suck me for a few minutes, just until I was good and worked up, then I said, "On the mattress, on all fours," as I kicked my jeans off.

There were latex gloves beside the bed, stolen from my clinical placement last semester, and I ripped a pack of them open and knelt behind Jake.

He was waxed, tidy and clean, and I ran an experimental fingertip down his crack, just to see him twitch. "How many do you take?" I asked, reaching for the lube.

"Three," he said. "There're poppers in my jacket..."

I reached across with my unlubed hand and shoved his jacket across the floor toward him, and slid my index finger in without warning.

He jumped, his body clamping around my finger briefly, and I could feel myself smiling as he gasped. I pulled back, pushed a second finger in, making him squirm, and then added the third. There was sweat beading up his back, and his shoulders were hunched over now, his face pressed against the mattress.

It was such a turn-on, finding a man who got off on being touched like that, and I watched Jake scramble to get the lid off the little brown bottle of poppers and shove it against his nose, timing the twist and jab of my fingers to his snort.

Jake slumped forward, gasping, and held the bottle over his shoulder with an unsteady hand as I pulled my fingers out roughly and slammed my cock into him.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

The fumes hit me, and I turned my head away; if I had too much, I wouldn't have the control I needed to fuck Jake through the mattress.

He was pliant, the bottle rolling across the bare boards of the floor, his mouth slack and eyes closed, gasping with each thrust of my cock into his arse, each drag of the big bead of my piercing through his body.

His hand was shoved under his hips, jerking at his cock, his shoulders tense, and I gritted my teeth and held back, waiting for his shouts and the thick smell of come over the aml before I groaned and let go and fucked him hard, as hard as I could, until I came, too.

He left, ten minutes later, taking his poppers with him, and I stayed where I was, too fucked to move except to drag my sleeping bag up to stop from freezing. The housemates were partying downstairs, shouting over the pounding music, getting their last bit of fun in before semester started, too.

It was all work from here on, until after my final exams.

Chapter One

When the lift door eventually opened, it was five centimetres lower than the floor, and I helped the orderly lift the wheelchair out over the step, holding my breath so as not to get a noseful of the patient in the chair. Avoiding stench was probably the most important thing I'd learnt so far.

That, and how to lie about why I was late.

"Lift broke down," I said apologetically as I slid into the only empty seat around the Formica table in the staff room.

Everyone muttered sympathetically. That was what made the excuse so useful; the lifts broke down all the time and we all got stuck in them. In fact, I was already late before the lift doors jammed, and it was entirely my own fault for sleeping in.

All right, not quite everyone was sympathetic. Dr. Maynard was looking at me dubiously, but I kept my innocent face on and took out my stack of index cards.

"As I was saying, before Mr. Blake decided to honour us with his presence, expect to be asked to give a précis of any of the patients we see on today's rounds. Take notes, engage your brains. I'm not here to actually teach you anything; you have to do that yourselves. My only role is to stop the nurses from murdering any of you for messing with their ward," Dr. Maynard said, a flash of wry humour on his face. I wasn't sure how long he'd been over here, but he hadn't lost his American accent as far as I could tell.

All of a sudden, he looked human and kind of attractive, in a worn-out, entirely fuelled by caffeine way that I completely

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

identified with. He stood up and led us med students out onto the ward, and there was a certain amount of jostling as we sorted out the pecking order.

The middle-aged woman with a buzz cut sitting at a PC at the nurses' station said, "JesusfuckingChrist," as Dr. Maynard walked up.

"Good morning to you, too, Jane," Dr. Maynard said sweetly, smiling at her. "You're the CN today? Ready for rounds?"

"Unfortunately," she said, presumably not swayed by his charm. "Let's do this. Just stop the kids from breaking anything."

"What's a CN?" the tiny Asian girl beside me asked in a whisper.

"Clinical nurse," I murmured back. "Shift coordinator."

Nevins, who I knew from anatomy labs, said, "She Who Must be Obeyed."

We shuffled along behind Dr. Maynard, pens and index cards at the ready, then all packed into a cubicle around a bed holding a shrivelled-up old woman.

"How's the pain, Mrs. Mac?" Dr. Maynard asked loudly, bending forward over the old woman.

"Can't complain, doctor," she said, and Jane rolled her eyes expressively. The old girl obviously did complain. I reached forward and took the folder out of the rack at the foot of the bed.

"You can't do that," Nevins whispered, but I ignored him, opened the folder, and scanned the obs chart and the meds sheet quickly.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I jumped when Dr. Maynard said, "Perhaps Mr. Blake could tell us the pertinent information about Mrs. McDonald's pain management regime?"

Jesus Christ. There was a trick here. I looked through the oxycodone entries. The old dear was PRNing to the max. Every three hours...

There it was.

"Um," I said. "Her analgesics' frequency drops off during visiting hours. She's going five hours at least between doses in the afternoon."

Dr. Maynard nodded approvingly and I knew what a pet dog felt like when he dropped a soggy stick at someone's feet.

"And?" he said.

And? What else was there? Oh, impact on management, of course.

I flicked through the file to her nursing admission. Mrs. McDonald lived alone, with her family dropping in every couple of days to check on her.

"The patient might have a better quality of life in a less isolated environment. Living with other people in a hostel, perhaps."

"I'm not going to no fucking old age home," Mrs. McDonald said. "You can all just fuck off."

There was a snigger from my fellow students, and Dr. Maynard's eyes were twinkling at me when I looked up at him. I closed my mouth quickly, kicking myself for having walked into that trap.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He patted Mrs. McDonald's hand. "We're not going to put you in a home, Mrs. Mac," he said. "I was thinking of you going to live with one of your daughters."

"They're monsters," Mrs. McDonald said. "They won't let me have my ciggies."

"Seems to me that you can't have had many cigarettes stuck in a hospital bed," Dr. Maynard said. "And you don't seem to be suffering too badly. How about I talk to your family and we see what we can work out?"

Mrs. McDonald harrumped and tucked her bedding around herself more securely with hands wizened by arthritis. I looked at the medication chart again. Yep, the old bat was on nicotine patches, that was why she wasn't having cravings.

Dr. Maynard nodded at Jane. "Page me when the Mac clan comes in to visit, and we'll do a family conference."

I put the folder back where it came from and we moved en masse into the next cubicle, all the students scribbling notes frantically. DAP. Data, assessment, plan. My scrawl was illegible.

The rest of the round was all like that. We took turns being idiots, though Nevins was the biggest idiot, making a patient cry by pumping the blood pressure cuff up too far.

In the staff room afterward we sat around, trying to look insignificant, while Dr. Maynard explained to us exactly how we had stuffed up and handed out follow-up work.

"I want a ten-minute presentation on these patients. I want to know what's wrong with them, and how we can get them back on their feet." He allocated us a patient each and I kind of expected to be given Mrs. McDonald, but he gave me

the teenage girl with renal insufficiency instead. I was relieved; I had some hope of charming the girl into talking to me.

We all dreamed of making some kind of earth-shattering breakthrough in a case, like Amy Tsien had last year. She'd found a neurological deficit from aminoglycoside ototoxicity that all of the medical specialties team had missed. It had earned her an A for her major case study, something that was supposed to be impossible.

I wasn't the only one thinking along these lines, because Nevins said, "Is this assessable?"

Dr. Maynard stared at Nevins for a moment as if he was something nasty that had been spilt on the floor. "It is now," he said. "And for asking that question, I can tell you the best mark you can hope to get is a C. Now all of you, get out of here, and let me do some real work."

There was a coffee and loo break before we were due in anesthetics and we stood eagerly as Dr. Maynard collected together his papers and files.

As we left, Dr. Maynard said, "Mr. Blake? A moment, please?"

I looked wistfully across the ward as my fellow med students in their short white jackets and shiny new stethoscopes bolted for the dodgy lifts. "Yes, sir."

"I want you in on the Mac family conference. Have you got a cell phone?"

I nodded and scrawled my number on the notepad he pushed toward me. He looked less tired now, and really rather attractive with his strong jaw and faded blond hair, and

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I wished for a moment that I was giving him my number in a bar somewhere.

"Thanks," Dr. Maynard said, and I nodded and practically ran for the stairs. No way was I going to risk the lifts when there were exactly seven minutes for me to get a coffee in.

Chapter Two

The Mac clan was as argumentative as Mrs. Mac herself, and the family conference was loud and boisterous, but I didn't sense any underlying hostility. It seemed this was just the way the whole family related to the world.

It had ended satisfactorily, with Mrs. Mac eventually pointing one gaunt hand at the short fat daughter and announcing she was going to live with Our Sheryl and they could all shut up.

Matthew Blake leaned against the wall of the elevator, looking frazzled, like most students did, and I smiled at him. "You okay?"

He smiled weakly back. "Yeah, though I think my head hurts now. Are all family conferences like that?"

I shook my head. "That was a good one. I never doubted that the kids would do the right thing. It was just up to Mrs. Mac to decide who could look after her best."

"What's a bad one like?" Blake asked, and he went up a little in my estimation. Most med students would have been too overwhelmed from the family conference to try and extract additional information from it.

"Sometimes families refuse to look after an aged parent. Sometimes bad things happen." The elevator door opened and Blake got out, too, following me to the cupboard that the hospital deigned to call my office. Another point for the kid. He could have just stayed in the elevator.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Bad things?" he asked as I nodded to the permed ogre, who was technically the general medical secretary, and unlocked my office door.

He followed me in and I collapsed down into my squeaky chair and ignored the blinking light on my phone. If someone really wanted to talk to me, they'd use my pager. "Yeah, bad things." Blake sat down on the plastic garden chair that was the only other thing to sit on apart from my desk, which was covered in textbooks and coffee cups and Xeroxes.

"We had a patient a couple of years ago. I can't remember what his exact complaint was; basically he was confused and failing to thrive. He was underweight, so we asked his family to sit with him for meal times, just to encourage him to eat."

I must have looked grim because Blake said, "What happened?"

"The nurses noticed something. Every meal, whoever was supposed to be feeding him was eating his meal for him."

"Elder abuse?" Blake said, frowning. "How could they do that?"

The concern on Blake's face touched me, made me really look at him for the first time. He was lovely: clear-skinned, dark curls, long elegant hands. God, it was usually only the female med students I looked at like that.

"Sometimes love and hate and power all look the same," I said. "Kinship betrayals are the worst kind. He went to an old age home, where at least he'd get something to eat. There wasn't much else we could do for him."

"But that won't happen to Mrs. Mac?" Blake asked, biting at his bottom lip.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"My assessment is that she seems to have plenty of power in the family. Of course, I might be wrong there."

The cogs were whirring in Blake's head. Welcome to the world of general medicine, sweetheart; there's no easy surgical answers here.

Blake nodded, and he still looked worried.

"All any of us can do is be aware," I said. "You just learned something that I doubt the rest of your intake have figured out yet." I smiled at him and then opened my desk drawer, taking out a bag of candy and offering it to him. "Gummi bear?"

He took one and shook his head in disbelief. "You keep sweets in your desk?"

I pointed at the box of Kleenex on the desk. "Standard teaching aides. Gummi bears and tissues will fix most things."

My pager was whirring away on my hip as Blake left. I propped my feet on my desk, switched my monitor on, and logged into the mail server to retrieve the pages. Post-it notes festooned the monitor; I added two more to the collection as I listened to my messages. Med school questions about assessment. A message from my ex about our son. Messages from the outpatient clinic. Two drug company reps who could safely be ignored. Why did nobody ever leave a message asking me if I wanted to have sex? I'd settle for a date; it didn't even have to be sex.

* * * *

By the time the particularly uninspiring young man with the hair falling in his eyes had finished, I was working hard at

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

looking supportive and encouraging when I really just wanted to gouge my eyes out with the PDA that the shy Asian girl was fiddling with. Fuck, if she was playing Snake on it, I'd give her extra marks if she handed it over to me. It had to be more interesting than this tutorial.

When it was her turn, she put the PDA down, took out her index cards, and began to drone on. Why me? Why did the med school insist on sending their neophytes to me for house training? I must have done something dreadful in a previous life to deserve this.

Thankfully, she was the last. I nodded, smiled at her, and said, "Mr. Blake, will you hand me over your cards?"

Blake looked anxiously down at the stack of cards on the table in front of him, then passed them to me.

They were just about unreadable, but I could make out the scrawled headings. I redid his presentation for him; cut the social history back to four words, spent a couple of hundred on her CT results, another hundred on her Us and Es, and brought the whole lot home in 90 seconds.

There was a stunned silence around the table as I handed Blake back his cards and said, "For a ten minute presentation, I want some substantial content. Some real meat. I want to hear about treatment options, conservative and interventionist. I want to hear what the real world cost of the treatment is, and how much of the department resources it's going to consume. I want some discussion of patient compliance, too. No point in using home monitoring if they haven't got two neurons to rub together. The goal for the

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

hospital has to be to shift management back to the family doctor where possible."

The students looked horrified, so I rescued my empty coffee mug, scooped up my files, and left them. No doubt they'd have bitter things to say as soon as I was out of hearing, but I was comfortable with that.

* * * *

Blake was waiting outside my office at the end of the following day, and I regretted letting him find out where it was so easily. I preferred the students to find it by themselves; it was a good test of initiative to make them locate it through the central hospital directory. Not to mention courage when it came to getting past the guard dog, who was smiling fondly at Blake from behind her tacky magazine. He must have charmed her somehow. I was impressed.

I opened the door, flopped into my chair, and looked expectantly up at him. He sat down and shuffled his index cards nervously.

"Yes?" I said.

"I want to redo my presentation."

"I'm not going to change your mark."

"That's not ... I just want to get it right," he explained.

"Okay, I'm listening, but I reserve the right to stop you if it's crap," I said. "I'm not being paid enough to sit through presentation reruns."

I didn't have to stop him. He did it cold, no notes, and it was solid and concise. Still unspeakably dull, but renal

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

insufficiency was like that. I stood up and held out my hand to him.

He looked confused as he stood and took my hand. I shook it. "Congratulations. You're not a moron. Keep going like that and you'll restore my faith in humanity."

He coloured a little and blinked, his eyelashes tiny fans against his skin, then smiled at me. This must have been what he had done to get past The Secretary From Hell. Fuck, but he was gorgeous, and I let go of his hand before it all became far too embarrassing.

"Get out of here," I said, but my voice wasn't the least bit grouchy.

Chapter Three

Lin, the Asian girl, said, "There's Dr. Maynard in the queue," grabbing my arm and pulling me behind her up to the junk food counter. All right, so I wasn't the only student to have noticed he was cute. I followed her, even though I was carrying my own food in my backpack. I could always scrape together the coins to buy a can of soft drink.

He smiled at both of us in greeting, then leaned across the counter and said, "I'll have the cardiology special," to the bored-looking teenager behind it.

"Righty ho," she said and took his money.

"What's the cardiology special?" Lin asked. "Is it really healthy or something?"

Dr. Maynard shook his head. "No way. It's a burger with cheese and fried egg, with fries and a thick shake. The cook changed the name when he noticed that the cardiology team all ordered it. I think they made one of their residents measure the saturated fat in it once."

"How much was in it?" I asked. "Just out of morbid curiosity."

Lin ordered a salad and Dr. Maynard took the bright yellow shake the girl handed him.

"Thirty-five grams I think." He quirked an eyebrow at us. "Okay, what's the recommended maximum daily intake of saturated fat?"

I looked blankly at him, and Lin promptly said, "Twenty grams, no more than half of the total daily fat intake of forty grams."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I ordered a Diet Coke, and Dr. Maynard said, "You haven't read the latest papers on Aspartame, have you?"

Point to Dr. Maynard. Now it was my turn. "I'll worry about my brain tumours if you worry about your arteries."

He chuckled and took the plate heaped with chips that the girl held out. "Join us, the pair of you," he said.

Lin glanced up at me, looking scared. The medical students usually hid in the back corner of the dining room and tried not to pester the real staff. We were supposed to know our place, but if one of the senior registrars invited us to eat with him, we were probably obliged to accept.

Then there was the hunk factor. It wasn't likely that either of us would refuse.

He was sitting with Jane and another nurse I didn't recognise, a bloke wearing the same solid red shoulder epaulettes as Jane. Lin and I sat down at the table and Jane nodded at us, then turned her attention back to the guy, who was talking about the Ducati he'd just bought.

Somehow I'd imagined that the mighty medical types would talk about case studies at lunch, but Dr. Maynard was eating chips and waving his other hand in the air, describing the Indian his father had owned.

A nurse walked past the table and smiled pointedly at Dr. Maynard. She didn't look like Jane or the bloke—Daniel, according to his name badge—and it took me a moment to work out how she was different. Her hair was long and in some fancy plait, her uniform was clean, and she had real shoes on, not sneakers. There was a cane basket in her hand, with an expensive lunchbox and some knitting showing.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Nothing like Jane and Daniel, with their crumpled, splotched uniforms and hamburgers.

"Hi, Andrew," she said, throwing in a wriggle as she went past.

Jane leaned forward and said, "FDO," to Lin and me under her breath.

"What's that?" Lin asked, keeping her voice down.

"'Fucks Doctors Only'," Daniel explained.

Dr. Maynard nodded. "Registrar's Mattresses. You'll get to pick them; they invariably work in ICU."

Lin and I exchanged glances, then we both burst out laughing. Jane waved a chip at us and said, "Sure, you think it's funny now. Just wait until you're a resident, it won't be quite so funny, then, especially if they find out you're planning on specialising in something profitable."

"Not gen med," Dr. Maynard said. "Orthos make a decent living, but I've always thought dermatology was the way to go for a career path. None of your patients ever die, none of them get better, and you never have to get out of bed in the middle of the night. Either of you thought about what area you want to work in?"

I shook my head. "Just getting through finals is enough of a goal at the moment. Getting through and not stuffing up badly."

Lin said, "I really like lab work. I'd like to do micro."

Dr. Maynard stared at Lin for a moment. I must admit I thought she was pretty weird, too. "I don't think either of you have anything to worry about with your finals. And you'll both make damn good doctors."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I was inordinately pleased with Dr. Maynard's praise, and wished I shared his confidence in our abilities.

"Hospitals are strange," I said, and everyone besides Lin cracked up. She just nodded sympathetically beside me.

Smart one, Blake. Now I looked even more like an idiot. That would serve me right for opening my mouth and just letting words fall out. I bit into my cheese sandwich, trying to salvage some dignity, and Dr. Maynard patted my shoulder reassuringly.

"They are," he agreed. "Weird shit happens here."

All right, we had a full-on lust situation here. Serious chemistry. Fuck, but his hand felt good, and my overactive imagination thought that it slid off my shoulder a little too slowly.

Tomorrow I was wearing my pink triangle earring.

Chapter Four

I was exasperated. There was no other word for it. Nevins was staring at me like a deer trapped by car headlights, so I smiled at the poor patient who was retching and indicated with my head for the students to follow me out of the cubicle.

"Okay, who here has actually inserted a naso-gastric tube?" I asked.

There was a universal shaking of heads.

"Can any of you at least tell me how to check that one is correctly positioned?" I was going to throttle someone soon. If it wasn't Nevins, it'd be whoever was supposed to have taught them this stuff already.

Lin said, "Um, there's three ways, Dr. Maynard. Litmus paper to test acidity of aspirate, auscultation for gurgling of injected air, and X-ray confirmation of the location of the radio-opaque tip." She looked like she was about to cry, so I smiled reassuringly at her.

"Absolutely right. Now, Blake, tell me about the relative merits of each method."

Long eyelashes fluttered and I noticed Blake's earring. That was brave of him, and I wondered for a moment if this was a response to the discussion of the predatory nurses here.

During this moment, Blake got his shit together and retrieved a textbook answer from his memory.

"Good," I said when he'd finished. "Follow me."

I took them to the storeroom and searched the shelves and bins for a little while, then grabbed a handful of NGT kits

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

and lube sachets. "Here," I said. "Go home tonight and practice on yourself. I'm not letting you learn on an unsuspecting member of the general public."

There was a stunned silence from the little dears before they took their kits and filed out of the storeroom. Blake was last, and as he walked past, I said quietly, "Nice earring."

I was out of line, of course, since that was almost flirting, and I expected Blake to just pretend he hadn't heard, but he paused and looked at me sideways.

"Do you have one, too?" he asked, and he coloured a little.

My eyes were fixed on his mouth now, and God help me, but I was getting hard. We were definitely into flirting territory now.

"No, but I should have." My eyes dropped for an instant to Blake's hands. He was squeezing the sachet of lube between his fingers. I glanced at the door of the storeroom, even though I knew there was no way we could lock ourselves in here.

Nevins appeared in the doorway and we both let out long breaths of relief. Jesuuuus, but things had been about to get out of hand. "Um, Dr. Maynard," he said. "I need more lube. I just burst the sachet."

He held out one hand, which was dripping lube.

I cracked. Between the combination of sexual tension and the dawning realization I was actually flirting with a sexual harassment suit, as well as a student, it was all too much. I clung onto the shelving beside me and shook with laughter.

I waved a hand feebly at the bin containing the lube sachets, and Nevins took another one with his clean hand.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

When he'd gone, I looked at Blake, shaking my head in disbelief and still chuckling. He was grinning back at me, a hundred megawatt smile that warmed me all the way through.

As Jane frequently said, JesusfuckingChrist.

"Back to work," I said to him. "Let's go eke out the public health system's resources a little further by exploiting the free labour you people represent."

* * * *

Thud.

I leaned forward and thumped my head softly on the table again.

Thud.

"No," I said, my voice a little muffled until I sat up again. "That is wrong on so many levels." The spotty kid, who had been reading from his Palm Pilot, paused and peered at me through his spectacles.

"What did I say wrong?" the student asked, and I glared at him.

"You cannot say that being black is a risk factor for heart disease."

"But it is..." he spluttered. "Our pathophysiology textbook says so..."

"Then your textbook is wrong." Judging by the look on the kid's face I had said something scandalous. "It's the social disadvantages that go with being black that are the risk factors: being poor, being malnourished, having a lower standard of education, and impaired access to health care."

There is nothing intrinsic about skin colour that affects heart disease risk."

"But..." the kid said, and I shook my head.

"That's just crap," I said. "Just like being gay isn't a risk factor for HIV infection. It's the sexual activity itself that is the risk factor, not the orientation. Read your textbooks with a critical mind, people. Deep-seated prejudices run through them."

There was stony silence around the table, though Blake was looking smug and managing to mostly hide it.

"Have any of you got a textbook with you?" I asked. "I'll show you what I mean."

I'd politicise these brats before this was over. It was that, or I was going to wind up cancelling the tutorial and stomping out.

Nevins handed over a textbook from his backpack. Excellent; it was a reproductive anatomy text; I couldn't have asked for a better example.

Five seconds in the index gave me the page I wanted. "Tell me what's wrong with this passage," I said, and I began to read: "Menstruation is the failure to achieve pregnancy. If the egg released at ovulation is not fertilised, the corpus luteum degenerates, the endometrium deteriorates and the necrotic tissue is lost through the vagina."

I waited, and no one said anything. "Well?" I prompted.

I banged the text down on the table, making them all jump. "Menstruation is the failure to achieve pregnancy? What sort of sexist rubbish is that?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

More silence, but at least it looked like some of them had got the point. "And what about the language? Failure? Degenerates? Deteriorates? This is entrenched prejudice, people. I want all of you to rewrite this passage..." I checked the page number, "on page sixty-seven in culturally neutral terms. For tomorrow."

I pushed Nevins's book back across the table to him, picked up my files, and left them sitting around the table with looks of horror on their faces. They were going to have to grow some left-wing sensibilities if they were going to train in the public health system.

Chapter Five

It hurt, there was no way around it. I pulled the NGT out of my nose and smeared more lube on the end. Of all of the things I'd ever done with lube, I'd never put it up my nose before, and it seemed intrinsically wrong.

Following the adage that 'too much lube is almost enough' helped, and this time I managed to get the tube into the back of my nose. The back of the throat bit was worse, even with sipping water to help it down, but I did it, despite a couple of hangover-type retches.

In the mirror I'd reached the mark I'd made on the tube, so I put the 20ml syringe on the end of the tube and aspirated.

Yuck.

Ramen noodles.

That was definitely in the right place. This was reaching a new stage of hideousness.

When I'd hauled the tube back out again, I had a new appreciation for the whole process. Guess that was what Dr. Maynard had intended.

I dropped the tube into the green garbage bag hanging off my wardrobe door and stretched out on my bed, ignoring the textbooks digging into my side.

Fuck, but the term Registrar's Mattress had real appeal right now. That man was hot, and if the circumstances had been different, I would have jumped him today. Oh, yeah, jumped him hard. I still couldn't quite believe he'd hit on me,

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

that we'd been standing there like that, both staring at the lube I'd been holding.

Then that fuckwit Nevins had blundered in. Dr. M. had been right, it had been screamingly funny in a frustrated, unbearably horny way and I wasn't sure what might have happened if we hadn't been interrupted. We couldn't have shagged, not on the ward...

I groaned quietly.

...but we could have done something ... even snogging would have been heaven.

There was lube left from my NGT learning curve experience, so I unzipped myself and curled slick fingers around my cock.

* * * *

Dr. M looked even more gorgeous the next morning at rounds and I decided I was well on my way to being obsessed with the man. I was a pushover, totally.

He, however, seemed miles removed from the bloke who had tried to pick me up the day before. In the staff room, he was grim and distant.

"Who actually attempted to insert a NGT last night?" he asked.

About half of us put our hands up.

"Who succeeded?"

Lin and I were the only ones who kept our hands up.

"Fine," he said. "Everyone else is in this room at the end of rounds, practicing on each other." Relief swept through me. If

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

there was anything worse than having to insert a NGT in myself, it was holding still while one of these clowns did it.

"But..." one of the students I only knew by sight said.

"What if we don't want to?"

"Just be glad it's not urinary catheters," Dr. Maynard said.

"This is assessable."

* * * *

We went to the pub that afternoon. It was the only possible response, and honoured the long-standing tradition that, of all students, med students drank heaviest because they best understood how to recover from a hangover.

I wasn't sure how this fitted in with my personal awareness that man could not live by ramen noodles alone; I was just sure that drinking beer was more important right at that moment than eating was going to be for the next few days.

Nevins and Lin solved the conflict by buying for me. Seemed that Nevins's folks had money, and Lin had a scholarship, so we drank pints really fast, settling in at the bar ahead of the rush as the medical system at the hospital cut back to evening staffing levels, but well behind the nurses, whose day shifts ended at 3.30 p.m..

Lin was downing Southern Comfort shooters with her pints, which I thought was a stupid thing to do, but she seemed to hold her liquor well.

Nevins, on the other hand, was a giggler, in the sort of silly, infectious way that only geeky blokes had. I liked him

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

better like that, especially when I noticed it was only Lin that he kept spontaneously hugging.

She seemed sober still, apart from her pink cheeks, but she kept cuddling Nevins back, and fiddling with her hair. We had actual, in the flesh, nerd courtship happening here, and Nevins was so damned pleased with himself that I kind of forgave him for walking back into the storeroom yesterday.

I leaned back against the bar and scanned the room just to avoid intruding upon the eyelash-fluttering and lip-licking that was going on—and that was just Nevins.

I found myself staring at Dr. M.

He'd changed out of the nondescript trousers and shirt he wore on the wards, and was wearing faded jeans and a T-shirt, looking completely fuckable as he leaned against a wall, pint in his hand, communing with some other doctor types.

Today's bad mood seemed to have evaporated and he was smiling and waving his free hand in the air as he talked to a man who looked like a psychotic teddy bear in a suit. I guess if I had to face a troop of med students every morning as well as my usual workload, I'd be prone to bad moods, too.

He looked up at that moment, and I must have had an idiotic grin on my face because he smiled back at me, a particularly goofy smile that did great things to me.

Lin pushed another pint into my hands and followed my gaze. She said, "Oh," under her breath and went pinker, then Nevins hugged her again, distracting her.

I turned back to the bar.

Chapter Six

F was in full flight, describing his close encounter of the obnoxious kind with Human Resources that day, and I felt the tension begin to ebb.

It had been a bad day, with a bad night before it. I couldn't believe how close I'd come to blowing my career, or at least to blowing something else.

I'd walked onto the ward this morning absolutely determined to keep the barriers in place. They were students; I was a tutor and supervisor. The hospital would have my ass.

Okay, that wasn't a good place to go in my head, and it certainly wasn't helping things. F frowned a little and said, "Andrew, you old bastard, what the fuck is wrong with you? You look like shit."

F was probably the closest friend I had on staff. He was hopelessly middle-class, with a full-blown chemical dependency or two, and he claimed he was only working until such time as THC became available on prescription. My sort of person, once I got past the fact he drove a BMW and sent his kids to boarding school.

"I want to ask you a personal question," I said, leaning forward and dropping my voice.

"I've got half a bag in the car," F said, leaning his head forward briefly, too, so our foreheads were touching.

I had to laugh. Maybe I was blowing this all out of proportion.

There I was again, thinking about blowing things.

"Have you ever fucked a med student?" I asked.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"A student in general, or one of my own?" F sounded far too entertained for my liking.

"One of your own."

"Yeah, a few," he said. "Is that what's up your arse?"

I spluttered beer at him.

"Ah," he said, wiping ineffectually at his suit jacket. "I prefer the girls myself, but whatever rolls your socks down."

"So, on a scale of appallingly bad taste lechery, where does it fall?" I asked. "How many of us decide that a power imbalance is no barrier to a really good fuck?"

F surveyed the bar, chewing on his lip in thought. "I can see three registrars or consultants here that I know of. Moronic residents don't count; they're just med students with the trainer wheels off. Say, a third of the quacks here." He looked at me as I took another mouthful of beer. "Tempted, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, grinning at F. I looked around the bar, trying to imagine which of my colleagues here had got down and dirty with a student.

Blake was leaning back against the bar, beer in his hand, smiling at me and looking utterly gorgeous.

F must have glanced across, too, because he gave a filthy chuckle. "I'm guessing it's not the tubby guy giving serious tongue to that girl, but the babe with the curls beside him. My, my, he is cute, isn't he? I'd swing for him."

Blake turned back to the bar as Nevins and Lin surfaced for air, and all I could think of was that I actually knew his cell phone number. It was in my wallet, along with his scrawled 'Matthew Blake'.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Buy me a beer." F thrust his empty pint into my hand.
"Now, because you are being flirted with, you idiot."

"Fuck off, Feargal," I said, but I took his glass and headed for the bar.

I could have walked to any part of the bar. It was all equally crowded with hospital staff discussing who they'd sleep with if the world was about to end, but I found myself walking toward where Blake, Nevins, and Lin were.

I pushed through the clump of theatre staff, distinctively reeking of isopropyl alcohol and chlorhex sterilising solutions, and up to the bar beside Blake.

Lin smiled at me. "Hello, Dr. M."

"Hi, kiddies," I said, and kicked myself. Stupid thing to say.

"Hi, Dad," Nevins said, giggling drunkenly.

Blake just grinned sideways at me.

I leaned across the bar and ordered two pints, pushing the empties across to the bartender, and nearly jumped out of my skin as a hand spread itself across my thigh, out of sight, where I was leaning against the bar.

Blake wasn't looking at me; he was talking to Nevins, teasing him about being pissed, but there wasn't anyone else's hand it could be sliding across my jeans slowly. Regardless of how young Blake might be, he was no innocent.

I paid the bartender, and the hand was firm as it eased between my thighs and pressed up against my balls.

Fuck, but I couldn't believe how turned on I was by this, but I managed to stifle the moan I gave as Blake's hand found my cock through the denim. I didn't know whether to

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

scream, beg for more, or just press Blake up against the bar and fuck him right then. What I really wanted to do was touch him back, but there wasn't any way I could figure out to do it discreetly.

I squeezed his hand where it was touching me, making sure he could feel how turned on I was, then took the pints the bartender slid across the bar toward me and stepped back out of the touch.

It wasn't easy getting back across the room holding two full glasses, but I managed it. I shoved F's beer at him and drank my own down in three long gulps, making F crack up.

"What happened?" he asked once he'd stopped laughing.

"I'm in," I said, and I took out my cell phone. I texted Blake a single word: 'tonight.'

"Let me buy you another beer," F said. "If you're getting laid, we need to celebrate. Let's see if I can pick someone up at the bar, too."

F did pick someone up. He was a consultant, he was single, he bathed, and he wasn't fussy; of course he picked someone up. He came back ten minutes later, holding the hand of a pretty young woman. "This is Lena," he said. "She works in High Dependency. Lena, this is Andrew."

"You're cute," she said, sliding her hand under my arm. "Are you good friends with Feargal?"

Fucking hell. Two offers in one night? Obviously two doctors were better than one.

"Not that good a friend," F said. He handed me both of the beers he was holding and left with Lena, squeezing her ass as they walked toward the door.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I could stay, drink the beers, and ogle Blake across the room. Or I could abandon the beers so I was still sober enough to drive, and go home and jerk off in the shower, then call Blake.

Home it was.

Chapter Seven

In the loos, Nevins pissed like a fire hydrant, then washed his hands and splashed water over his shirt.

"Blake," he said, hanging onto the wall for a moment. "Have you got any ... you know?"

I pissed, too, and washed my hands carefully. There's nothing like having done some micro to make you hygienic. "Sure." I fished around in my pockets, then handed him a couple of condoms, despite doubting his ability to fuck when he was already green around his gills from the booze. There was no way I was going to give him all of them, though; he wasn't the only one of us that was on a promise.

"Thanks," he said, slapping me on the back. "Sorry you're not going to get laid, too."

I slapped him back. "I wouldn't be so sure about that, matey," I said. "The night's still young. Now go and take Lin home and shag her."

"Rosanna," he said. "Her name's Rosanna."

"And you just remember that." I took his elbow and guided him out of the loos to where Lin was waiting for him.

She sat him down on a bar stool and pulled me aside. "Have you got any condoms?" she asked. "Because I can't imagine Nevins got any."

What could I do? I handed over my last couple of condoms. And I had no money to buy any more. Either the adorable Dr. M turned up bearing latex, or there'd be no fucking going on tonight.

"Have a good time," I said. "Don't scare him."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

She grinned wickedly. "What about you? Do I smell romance for you?"

"Breathe through your mouth, love, and you shouldn't smell anything," I said, and Nevins ambled over to us.

* * * *

I rang Dr. M's mobile while I was sitting at the bus stop. It switched through to his personal voicemail, and I left a brief, discreet message and hung up. I thought for a moment about phoning the hospital to ask for his pager number, but the potential embarrassment of trying to explain why I wanted it deterred me. Better to go home and be disappointed than to chance that.

He rang me back while I was jolting along on the bus. "Hey, Matthew," he said. "Sorry I didn't answer before, but I was in the shower."

"No problem." I felt myself smiling.

He was silent for a moment, and it made me smile more. "Are you busy tonight?" he asked.

"I do have a presentation due tomorrow," I said. "Apart from that, no plans."

He chuckled, this deep warm sound, and a matching warmth spread through my belly. "There's always the chance I'll be in far too good a mood tomorrow to want to listen to presentations."

"Do you want to come over?" I asked. "You could relive your student days, admire our beer can tower, meet my scummy housemates."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

There was a pause and Dr. M said, "Um, might not be such a smart move. I could come and pick you up, go grab food, and we could eat at my place."

Fuck, of course. He was worried I was sharing with someone like Nevins. "That sounds good," I said. "But you don't have to worry about my housemates; they're all disgusting engineering students."

"Okay," he said. "Text me your address, and I'll come over."

I couldn't think of a diplomatic way to ask if he had condoms, not with the way the guy sitting opposite me was perving at me, so I said, "Bye," and ended the call.

* * * *

I sat on the front steps and waited for Dr. M to arrive. If I went upstairs and tried to tidy my room, either no one would answer the door, or someone would, and they'd forget my name and that I lived there, too. I'm sure the seven or so people who lived in the house were all academic high achievers, but you couldn't tell.

A decrepit Morris rattled down the road and parked. Dr. M climbed out and walked back toward the house. I waved and stood up, watching him. He was wearing jeans, still, and a white shirt and leather jacket, and he looked so fucking good it was painful.

He climbed the steps, and when he spoke, I became aware of exactly how much noise was rolling out of the house. I think he said, 'Hey,' but I couldn't be sure, not with the volume at which Nine Inch Nails was being played.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Not that this was a time for conversation anyway. I'd only got to feel his cock briefly in the bar, but it had certainly been promising.

I slid a hand around his neck and pressed my mouth against his.

First kisses, first times, always had so much potential, and, God, this one just exploded. We both groaned. I felt his as a rumble through my body, and he pushed me against the doorframe, then kissed me utterly and completely. I clutched at him, got my other hand under his jacket, hung on for dear life, and we were fucking on the doorstep, but we both still had our clothes on, and it was only with our mouths.

I had no idea that kissing could feel so amazingly good, all hot and slippery and full of promises, leaving me breathless and dazed, and so fucking turned on that coming right there and then was looking more and more likely.

I wasn't the only one; I could feel Andrew breathing hard as his mouth pressed against my ear. "Your room," he said.

His hand was strong in mine, the skin smooth from endless washing, something I loved about medicine, the way it made hands feel. I led him into the house and past the door to the lounge room. There really was a beer can pyramid in one corner, and pizza boxes piled on the floor, and a mattress behind the couch, where Clive lived. Jeff was asleep on the couch, despite the noise, Geoff number two was playing PlayStation, and Clive was sucking on the bong. Just an ordinary student household.

We stepped over the looping ropes of ADSL cables that snaked up the stairs, the noise easing a little at the landing as

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

we moved out of direct blast range of the speakers in the kitchen, and I pushed my bedroom door open.

Chapter Eight

The noise was reduced to a muted pounding through the floorboards, and Matthew locked the door. I recognised his room from my own student days; the teetering mounds of textbooks, pages of scrawled revision notes drifting across the floor, sheets of paper covered in sketches of muscle groups pinned to the wall.

He flicked his reading light on, and I turned off the overhead light.

This time we kissed slowly. He tasted of beer, and I threaded my fingers into his curls. When he pulled back and began to unbutton my shirt, his lips shone slickly and he licked them, swiping his tongue across them, sending my imagination spiraling. How could I have had doubts?

I shrugged off my jacket and shirt, and he ran the flat of his hand across my chest, then pulled his T-shirt over his head.

The sight of his skin, so smooth and young, the way his nipples puckered in the cool air, and, oh, God, the bars through the tender skin, just about undid me there and then.

I bent forward, took one bar and the surrounding flesh into my mouth, and sucked.

Matthew groaned, I twisted the bar gently, and we staggered backward and down onto his lumpy futon. There was a book or something under my knee, and I found the bar again with my mouth, wondering for a moment if I could identify the book without looking at it. Would it be Davidson's *Principles and Practice*? Forbes' Atlas?

Then Matthew dragged his nails up my back, hitting the spot just under my shoulder blades that sent all thought skittering from my mind, and made me bite down on the bar.

He thrashed beneath me, and our bodies slid sideways so my hip was pressing against his cock, and his thigh was against mine. I began to hope he'd come just from what my mouth was doing.

Matthew grabbed my hair and pulled my mouth off his nipple. I started to complain, but he was so flushed and lovely and hungry beneath me that the words died away. "Latex?" he said. "Have you got some condoms?"

"Ah, yeah," I said. "Two in my jacket."

Matthew nodded. "Good. I donated all mine to a good cause tonight, and I don't have unsafe sex."

I scrambled across the room for my jacket, feeling for the inside pocket, and Matthew tossed the book that had been in the way onto the floor. It was Kelley's Essentials, which had not been on my list of guesses.

Matthew unzipped his jeans and pushed them down. When he pulled his cock out of his boxers I found myself frozen in place, hand in my jacket. He had a large metallic blue bead on the head of his cock, in the centre of the glans, and as he stroked himself I could see that there was a matching bead on the underside and a bar connecting them through the head of his cock.

"Fuck," I said, crawling back across the floor littered with clothes and books to the mattress on the floor.

"Like it?" Matthew asked, and I nodded mutely. "You think it looks good, you just wait until you feel it inside you."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Naked, Matthew was melt-in-your-mouth delicious, and I crawled over his body and lowered myself down onto him. Skin to skin, cocks sliding together, we kissed again, and God, we were on fire. "Suck me?" Matthew murmured against my ear as I latched onto the skin of his neck.

"Yeah," I said, and slid off him and watched as he rolled a condom carefully over the beads and down his cock. He was a good size, long and lean, and I leaned forward and took his cock into my mouth.

I must admit I'm not used to using a condom for oral sex, but, hey, Matthew could have asked me to do pretty much anything right then and I would have agreed. Falsify his assessment? Sure. Let him submit a dodgy essay? Oh, yeah. Skip rounds? Okay, as long as I could, too, and we could go fuck in the storeroom.

The beads were uncomfortable, bumping my palate at just the wrong place, so I changed angles, clambered around a little, and Matthew's hands spread my thighs and settled on my cock and ass.

His fingers slipped a little in my sweat, and I got the angles right, and he groaned loudly. Fuck it all, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt like this, not this stretched-out-gonna-last-for-hours kind of turned on. Matthew's thumb was pressing behind my balls, rubbing in circles, and his other hand was pumping my cock slowly. I sucked hard, and slid my hand between his thighs, pushing my fingers up against his perineum.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Fuck, yes!" he cried out, and his legs thrashed on the bed and he was yelling and clutching at me and coming.

The sheets were rumpled and gritty beneath my back when Matthew pushed me down onto them, but his fingers were smooth and gentle as he rolled the condom onto my cock.

He ripped open a pack of sterile gloves, and the bit of mind that was still working noticed that he wore a size eight. Big hands, long fingers; then his mouth was on me, and his fingers pushed gently inside me, and I felt like I was one orgasm away from losing my mind. There was lube beside the bed, hospital issue lube, but I hadn't noticed him putting some on his hand. He must have, because his fingers were sliding in and out steadily, and all I could do was ache and moan and wish it were his cock.

But I couldn't have had his cock and his mouth at the same time, despite what porn videos might maintain, so I clung onto the sheets and made myself relax enough that I wasn't ramming my cock down Matthew's throat repeatedly.

I was glad the music was loud downstairs, because I couldn't have stopped myself from yelling when I came, not with what Matthew was doing to me.

"Fuck," I groaned, and he crawled up the bed when I held my arm out for him. He pulled the condom off and dumped it and the glove onto the mess beside the bed. The air was thick with the smell of sex and come, and I buried my nose into his hair and took a deep breath in, inhaling his shampoo and skin smell, before lolling my head back onto the pillow.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Whoever you gave your condoms to, I hope they have sex as good as we did," I said, and Matthew propped himself up on his elbow and grinned.

"Nevins and Lin. And I doubt it. I suspect Nevins at least is a virgin. He's certainly stupid enough to have unprotected sex."

My hand slid down Matthew's body to touch his cock. "What's the piercing called?" I asked. "I've seen a Prince Albert on a patient, and it didn't look like this."

"It's an apadravya; it's mentioned in the Kama Sutra, that's how old the piercing is," Matthew said. "And yes, it hurt like fuck getting it done, and I wouldn't part with it now."

Now Matthew's cock was soft, the bar slid backward and forward through the flesh smoothly, but I heard the catch in his breath. "Is that good?" I asked.

"Yeah, feels good to have it touched."

Matthew gave a hiss of pleasure when I twisted the bar gently, and I could feel him hardening in my hand. "Do you want me to stop? Do you want to take this to my place, with some food?" I asked.

"No food here, no beer, no condoms. We need to move to your place."

Chapter Nine

When I had takeaway, it was a chip butty from the local chippie, but the stuff that Andrew carried back to the car smelled amazing.

He handed the bags over to me and started the car. "Galangal chicken," he said. "With fresh pineapple. Squid in black pepper sauce. Lemon and coconut sauce in that container. Prawn wontons. Cardamom rice."

"What sort of food is this?" I asked, opening the container and taking a piece of chicken out.

"It claims to be Thai, but in fact it's whatever the chef wants to cook."

The chicken was amazingly good, sweet and tangy and delicious, and I took another piece. "Fucking brilliant," I said, fishing out a piece of pineapple and eating it.

Andrew looked sideways at me and chuckled. "One day, you, too, will be earning enough money to eat this stuff."

"Oh, God," I said, finding some more chicken. "I can't wait. Just a resident's pay looks pretty bloody good right now. I'm tired of living on a student loan."

"Go ahead and eat it all," Andrew said, smiling at me while we were stopped at a traffic light.

"I will." I fed him a piece of pineapple and put my feet up on the dash of the car. "How come you drive such a crappy car? I thought all doctors had flash cars, that it was some kind of prerequisite for the job."

"A couple of reasons. On a purely financial basis, a car is a depreciating asset, unlike property, for instance. It's bad

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

income management to spend a stack of money on a car, according to my accountant. 'Drive the cheapest car your ego will let you,' she told me. And I take a perverse pleasure in refusing to play along with other people's expectations of how I should behave."

"I like it," I said. "Partly because I can put my feet on the dash without worrying. Partly because I just spilt galangal sauce over the seat, and you might be pissed at me if you had a decent car."

Andrew chuckled. "I'm going to make you lick that up," he said.

He didn't, and I'd eaten all of the chicken by the time he opened the security gates at a fancy set of terraces with a remote control and parked the car.

The gates swung shut behind us, and he led me down the row of houses to his.

The light above the porch worked, indicating the security here was decent, and Andrew unlocked the door and disarmed the security system while I nodded approvingly at his house.

It wasn't tidy or anything, but the couch looked comfortable underneath its covering of books and newspapers, and it didn't smell of engineers, unlike my place.

I picked up a framed photo of a kid from a bookshelf and Andrew peered over my shoulder at it. I could feel him radiating affection.

"That's Henry, my son," he said. "He's the reason I'm here."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"How come?" I asked, studying the photo. The kid was kind of chubby and looked nothing like Andrew.

Andrew took the photo out of my hands and put it back on the shelf. "His mom got offered work here, and rather than make him choose who he wanted to live with, I followed them over from the States. I can work anywhere as a doctor, but she's a classical violinist, and they don't have a lot of career options."

It struck me then what a generous man Andrew was.

"Food?" Andrew said, hefting the bags of takeaway, and I followed him into the kitchen. He found plates and forks while I opened the fridge, curious as to what I'd find.

Not food, at least not food that didn't come in jars. There was beer, and bottles of wine. Jars of olives, packs of cheese, dried fruit. Not particularly healthy, but not disgusting either.

The freezer had a bottle of vodka in it, and nothing else, so I closed it and took out two beers. Andrew held out a plate piled with food to me. "We'll need to sit on the couch, I've never bothered getting a dining table of any sort."

He cleared the couch by pushing everything off it onto the floor, and we sat down. Andrew must have been starving because he cleared his plate. I wasn't quite so hungry, having already eaten all that chicken in the car, but it was still excellent. A few hours earlier I'd been standing at the bar, considering the relative importance of food versus beer. Now, here I was, free beer and food.

Oh, yeah, and the sex.

I put the plate down on the coffee table and leaned across and kissed Andrew.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

We wound up with me straddling him, his hands sliding up and down my back, mouths joined, moaning simultaneously. I hadn't been with a man like Andrew for a long time. Between studying and ... well ... studying, I'd been taking what I could get in the way of sex. A quick hand job here, a bit of head there; I'd not really got into being with someone for a long time.

And, God, I was into this.

Andrew's hands had found my nipple bars again, making me squirm and shudder. "Bedroom? That's where the latex is."

His bedroom was messy, but without the level of microbiological dismay that mine had. There was no underlying odour of mildew, fewer textbooks, and there was the world's shiniest sound system on a bookshelf. Andrew might not drive a fancy, or even clean, car but the man was a sound equipment whore.

He turned the bedside light on and the main light off, and pressed buttons on the stereo. It wasn't commercial pop that came out of the speakers hanging from the ceiling but slow rolling drums, a soft percussive track that I could see the erotic potential of.

His bed was large and comfortable and I sprawled across it and took the condom he offered me. He let me roll it on my cock, presumably because it took some finesse to get it safely over the beads, then began to suck me again.

Oh, fuck, but this was good. We'd both been in too much of a screaming hurry last time, but this time the drum beat

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

was low and smooth and Andrew's mouth was firm as it slid up and down my cock.

"Gloves?" I asked, and he lifted his head briefly.

"Top drawer, along with the lube," he said, and I had to grin.

Either he had the same strict code of safe sex as I did ... or really freaky stuff happened in this bedroom. Either option seemed good; I could do really freaky. There was nothing turned me on like a man who wanted to be taken to the very edge of what his body could bear.

I pulled a glove on and touched Andrew's arse gently, just brushing my fingers over the skin, tickling and teasing, and his breathing suddenly became audible over the drums. Oh, yeah, he was into this.

The lube wasn't hospital issue, it was one of the slippery high-tech brands, and drips marked the sheets when I squeezed it onto my fingers. I kept my touch light still, warming Andrew and the lube up, then slipped one finger into him.

It was only a little way in, up to the first knuckle, but he was groaning around my cock now, and I slid it all the rest of the way in. "You're going to fucking love my cock in your arse," I said.

Three seconds later, he was stretched out across the bed, jerking away at his own cock, two of my fingers all the way inside him, yelling his head off as I finger-fucked him hard. I deliberately wasn't hitting his prostate, though I could tell by the way he was moving that he was instinctively trying to get in the right position for that. No, the first thing that touched

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

him there was going to be the big bead on my piercing as I slid into him.

I slid my fingers out, and Andrew's eyes opened. He was so fucking beautiful that I almost forgot what I was supposed to be doing. Almost, but not completely.

It felt so good to touch myself when I smeared lube over my cock, good enough to distract me for a moment, then I was kneeling ... leaning ... pushing gently.

Fuck.

It took a mammoth effort of will to hold still with just the head of my cock inside Andrew, but I managed to wait for him to growl, "Fuck me, for fuck's sake."

One long, slow, practiced push slid me half a length in, just about right in my opinion, and he fucking went crazy, thrashing around on the bed, clawing at me, yelling and swearing. I pushed all the way in, pulled back out half way, hit the spot again, and he just erupted. God, I loved my piercing right at that moment.

Once I was sure of what I was doing, sure of him, I kept my thrusts shallow, just rocking the bead backward and forward. My arms ached, my back twinged, and Andrew was so tight and utterly fuckable.

He wasn't going to last long, he didn't stand a chance, and I loved this, loved making someone's control crumble. He was jerking hard on his cock, I could feel his knuckles sliding across my belly, then he shouted and arched his back and I thrust in hard, and fucked him hard and fast as he came, taking myself over the edge, too.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Gasping, I collapsed down onto him, and the drums were keeping time with both of our hearts.

Chapter Ten

There was a quiet groan from Matthew when my alarm went off and I rolled over and switched it off.

"What time is it?" he asked sleepily.

"Five thirty. Want some coffee?"

"Why the fuck are you getting up this early?" Matthew asked. He rolled over and slid an arm around my hips, pulling me closer.

"Internal Medicine monthly divisional meeting at seven," I said. "Gotta turn up, don't have to be awake though."

Matthew chuckled and I kissed the tip of his nose, and he wriggled away from me, rubbing at his face in disgust.

"Yuck."

I left him and went to shower. Yuck was about right. It had been an intense night and I ached in a not particularly good way, and desperately needed a shower.

My ass was tender when I washed it; the soap stung and made me wince, but I hadn't done any damage. I'd change the sheets tonight, too.

When I walked back into the bedroom, towel around my waist, in search of clean clothes, Matthew had fallen asleep again, so I left him in peace.

The coffee was good and strong, and I leaned against the pantry, mind pleasantly empty. Divisional meetings usually made me all bitter, but my brain was like Jell-o this morning. I didn't think I could even manage to quote Hemingway at anyone.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Never been daunted in public ... I'm like a cat that way," I quoted. Oh, great, I managed to be intellectual and literary at six in the morning, and there was no one here to appreciate it.

The coffee percolator just sulked, so I shrugged and went and brushed my teeth.

I woke Matthew, gently shaking his shoulder, and he blinked at me and smiled slowly. "I have to go now. Do you want me to drop you back at your place? Or do you think you can deal with catching a bus from here?"

"Where are we?" he asked, stretching under the bedding. "You're close to Euston Road, aren't you?"

I nodded and pointed. "That way, about four blocks. Just pull the door closed as you leave, don't worry about the security system, it can stay off all day." I kissed him quickly. "Must go now; borrow a shirt or something if you need to. And a razor."

Matthew smiled at me. "Sure."

I couldn't help but smile back. "Dinner tonight?" I asked. "Or is your workload too much?"

Matthew's mouth twitched a little, perhaps in surprise, and he said, "Dinner would be wonderful, but I do need to hit the books tonight. Perhaps I could do that here, if I'm not being too pushy?"

"Sounds good. It's not like I'm short on work to do. I'll pick you up from your place?"

Matthew nodded, and I kissed him and left before we started showing each other our cocks again.

* * * *

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I wandered into the conference room, coffee in one hand, sticky bun in the other, files under my arms. I was still feeling peaceful and undeniably fucked, and F slapped me hard on my back, slopping my coffee.

"You're looking relaxed there, Andrew. Had a good night?"

"You're painfully happy there, F," I retorted. "Get any sleep?"

"Like an infant," F said, sitting down beside me. "She's a qualified massage therapist and Reiki practitioner. I'm in love, or at least in like. What about you?"

I shrugged. "How about I just say that I had my horizons broadened?"

F's eyebrows shot up. "Really?" he said in a low voice. "I want to hear about it."

I could trust F; he'd never betrayed a confidence before. "One word for you: apadravya."

He looked puzzled and I smiled in a way that I hoped was enigmatic, but probably looked smug.

The head of the division came in and sat down and I leaned back in my chair, prepared to enjoy the show. F had grown frustrated with the bureaucracy and politics and had deliberately misdiagnosed one of his patients as having kidney cancer, with the patient's full knowledge, just to force a surgical team to review her. It had worked, but he had pissed off a lot of people, including the head of the surgical division. This was going to be fun.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

The division head dropped a stack of patient case files on the table and said, "I need to talk about proper channels today."

"Don't you know about Irony and Pity?" I quoted under my breath.

* * * *

There was a gaggle of med students in the staff room, waiting for me. I put what must have been my fourth or fifth coffee of the morning on the table and sat down, looking at them. The boy with the spots looked anxious, and I wondered what he'd done wrong. The girl with the repaired cleft palate was yawning sleepily. Lin looked smug. And Nevins ... Nevins looked like he'd found heaven or something. He was positively beaming.

Matthew—no, Blake, since we were at work—looked the same as he always did. He was a better actor than I would have thought possible.

"There's a British Medical Association divisional meeting this afternoon so I won't be able to listen to this week's presentations. You can choose between working on whatever assessment pieces are overdue, or sitting in on the meeting, which is where I'll be."

"What's happened?" Lin said. "The division meeting isn't due for another two months."

I looked at her, impressed, and she coloured a little. "I joined last year," she explained. "All the meetings are in the newsletter."

"Excellent," I said. "The rest of you, as soon as you can afford it, join the BMA. They're the closest thing you have to a union, and when your employer tries to discipline you for doing the best you can for your patients, you're going to need them."

She leaned forward, elbows on the table, and said, "What's happened? Is there something going on in the hospital to make a meeting necessary?"

"Okay, a reasonable point. One of the renal consultants couldn't get the thoracic surgical team to assess one of his patients. They claimed they didn't have space on their list to even consider it. So, after talking to his patient so she knew what he was doing, he changed her diagnosis to malignant tumours. Surgical team saw her instantly and complained bitterly about the consultant bypassing the system. The admin wants to discipline the doctor; we want the BMA in on it because the doctor was just doing his job in the best way he could."

The students all stared at me, and I felt guilty for disillusioning them. "Who can tell me what the underlying issues are?"

Nevins was off in sexual fantasy heaven and I felt like grabbing him, shaking him, and shouting, "Do you think you're the only one here that had sex last night? The rest of us are managing to concentrate!"

I waited.

Lin said, "The primary objective is patient care. If it takes deception to manipulate the bureaucracy and get that, what's the problem?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I waited, and said, "And?"

Blank looks.

"What about the surgical team?" I asked.

"By the first doctor misleading them and forcing them to divert resources that they couldn't spare, it decreases their ability to provide care to their patients," Lin said.

"And?"

Lin looked puzzled, and it was Nevins who looked up and said, "It says something about the hospital if it is that short of resources."

I was stunned. Obviously a degree of critical thinking had been imparted by osmosis.

"Absolutely," I said. "What occupancy rate does the hospital run at?"

It was a rhetorical question; I didn't actually expect anyone to know.

"104%," I said. "Yes, we manage to consistently run at significantly over capacity. If you ever meet Rina, the bed manager, ask her about it. She describes it as rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic."

"How?" Blake asked. "How does the hospital fill 104% of its beds?"

What the hell, it didn't look like we were ever going to manage to do rounds today, so I might as well show them.

"Let's go. Come and have a look at the dark underbelly of the hospital, see how many people can be packed into Casualty on a bad day."

* * * *

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

F was in the cafeteria at lunchtime and I took my burger over to join him. He was looking far more cheerful than I had expected from someone who'd had a new one ripped at an early morning meeting.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Fucking awful," he said brightly. "But that's all right. I typed up a letter of resignation and left it in the printer 'accidentally' for a minute or two. That should help things."

"I made my med students think about your problem. Then I took them to Casualty."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really? Did it help?"

I shrugged. "Fuck knows."

He smiled knowingly. "I looked it up. I'm impressed."

"So was I," I said.

Chapter Eleven

The meeting was mind-boggling. I sat down the back with Lin and watched in amazement as the Powers That Be went head to head with a bunch of angry doctors. There had been shouting, heated discussion of the standard employment contract the hospital used, and threats of industrial action.

Lin and I sat in rapt silence through this, though I must admit that I kept my eyes on Andrew most of the time. He was so passionate, speaking at one point about the obligations of practicing medicine, and the hospital's abrogation of its duty of care, and I tried to reconcile this aspect of him with what I'd seen the night before. What he'd let me do. How good it had been.

Lin nudged me at one point, while Andrew was talking, and whispered, "You've got it bad for him, haven't you?"

"Guess so," I whispered back.

Fuck, I'd been so sure it had been a one-night stand; that we'd just fuck and that would be it, and I couldn't quite believe that he'd asked me over for dinner, and that he was happy for me to study at his place. That implied something I hadn't really had a chance to think about. Was it possible he wanted a relationship? That would explain him lending me his shirt, leaving me to let myself out of his house.

He was shouting now, standing up beside the doctor who had lied about his patient, the same man I'd seen him talking to in the bar the night before. I thought of what we'd seen that morning, where he'd taken us in the hospital. I guess at an intellectual level I'd known that parts of the National

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Health were in that bad a state, but it was a shock to actually see it.

It made me want to shout, too, and those patients weren't my patients yet. They would be soon, either here or in another hospital, and I wasn't sure how I'd cope.

The BMA lawyer interrupted one of the hospital's lawyers and said, "This is at an impasse. I suggest we stop now, we're not making headway."

The doctor that had precipitated this mess, the one who looked like he was Andrew's friend, stood up and called out, "Drinks are on me, ten minutes, in the bar over the road."

Andrew slapped him on the back and pushed his way through the doctors who were all standing up, talking at the top of their voices.

"Good to see you both here," he said. "Join us at the bar?"

Lin said, "We'd love to," and Andrew smiled at us briefly, then turned to speak with the person who was tapping on his shoulder.

Lin grinned at me in the lift. A couple of other doctors got in, too, so I was saved from whatever teasing Lin obviously had in mind.

She stayed for one drink only, then left, presumably to meet up with Nevins, leaving me leaning uncomfortably against the bar, listening to the BMA rep try and persuade me to buy a membership. I wanted to leave, but I really wanted to talk to Andrew first. I guess I was still uncertain that he actually wanted to see me again. Wasn't much I could do about that right at that instant.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He walked past me while I was at the urinal, and I wanted to turn and look at him, but pissing with an apadravya requires a degree of concentration. There was a bang, bang, bang and when I looked over my shoulder, he was pushing open all the doors of the cubicles.

Oh, yeah.

I followed him into the end one.

This wasn't a particularly classy bar; there were needle disposal units in each of the cubicles, but the wall that I found myself pressed up against was clean enough.

The kiss wasn't clean, it was wet and demanding, and I clung onto Andrew and kissed him back as hard as I could. Fuck, his hands were pulling at my chinos and I was hard in an instant, groaning as he stroked me and sucked on the skin of my neck.

"Fuck," he groaned, and I felt rather than heard the word.

Someone came into the bathroom. I could hear him whistling and pissing, then there were voices and Andrew was kissing me like there was no tomorrow, our mouths sliding wetly together.

He was hard when I found his cock through his clothes but he guided my hand away. "No," he whispered. "This is for you."

He flicked his wrist on the next stroke, and squeezed and I closed my eyes and leaned back against the cubicle wall.

One of the loos flushed, a hand basin tap ran, and I groaned. Andrew pushed fingers into my mouth to shush me. There was a muffled chuckle from someone, and the door to

the bar opened briefly, letting in a sudden wash of voices for a moment.

"Be quiet," Andrew murmured, and he stroked me hard.

There are two ways I come. I can scream and thrash and clutch and groan and in general make a hell of a fuss about it. Or I can hold still, legs trembling, stomach muscles quavering, keeping quiet.

It was the wrong one, and I think I bit Andrew's fingers.

He was almost convulsed with laughter by the time I'd finished, and if I hadn't been hanging onto the wall for support, and trying to collect my scattered wits and clothes, I might have thought it was funny, too.

"Jesus Christ," an unfamiliar voice said. "Good to know someone is having fun."

The door to the bar opened again and while I pulled my trousers up, Andrew stood on the toilet bowl and peered over the top of the cubicles. "All clear." He clambered down and kissed me quickly. "I'll pick you up at eight from your place."

I gave him a couple of minutes to mingle back in the crowd, and for anyone watching to become bored with waiting to see who else walked out, before heading out of the bathroom and through the bar to catch the bus back to my place.

There was a fair bit of good-natured ribbing from my housemates for taking a guy upstairs and fucking, then disappearing for the night, but I just nodded and smiled and told them to fuck off back to engineer land.

I stuffed some textbooks and my laptop into my backpack, along with some clean clothes and a razor and toothbrush,

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

then flopped down onto my unmade bed. I hadn't planned on sleeping, in fact I had a microbiology textbook in my hands, but I fell asleep instantly.

Chapter Twelve

F slung a cheerful arm around my shoulders. "Andrew, you wanker." He pushed a pint at me with his free hand. "Gonna get fired with me?"

"Absolutely," I said. Right then, I didn't actually care about much of anything, least of all losing my job. Matthew was adorable, I was picking him up later, we were going to fuck. For a man with an over-developed social conscience, I was proving to be easily distracted by a little sex. Perhaps principles were for people who were celibate. Everyone else was too busy fucking to worry about anything else.

"What you thinking about?" F asked, leaning his head closer and ignoring the BMA rep, who was being boring.

"That I don't fucking care if I'm going to lose my job over this. What the fuck does it matter?"

F shook his head and I began to suspect he was drunker than he seemed. Of course, he could just have stopped off at his car for a couple of joints before coming to the bar.

"Andrew, my sweet boy." He pushed his mouth close to my ear. "You reek of sex," he whispered. "Come all over your clothes?"

Fuckityfuckityfuck. There was no way I was going to look down and find out, but it was one detail that had escaped me at the time.

"Think I might just go home," I said to F and he nodded sagely.

"Smart move there. Leave me here with the BMA rep, why don't you?"

"Don't drive."

He nodded and pursed his lips. "Not going to. Have given my keys to, um, someone. Think she was a blonde." He looked hopefully around the crowd at the bar, and I left him risking life and limb by frisking people at random, presumably in search of his keys.

F was right, I did reek of sex, and in the car I ran an experimental hand over my clothes. Yep, there was a good reason for the pervasive smell.

At home, I changed my work clothes for jeans and T-shirt, and changed my sheets, too. Food would require some thought, eventually, and possibly a stop for more take-away.

There weren't crashing waves of noise rolling out of Matthew's house, but still no one answered when I knocked repeatedly on the door. I eventually pushed it open and found myself staring at a room of scabby looking students, one of whom was pushing an entire piece of pizza into his mouth, while another one sucked on a bong.

"Is Matthew around?" I asked, and a boy shrugged. And the boy proved to be a girl when she lifted her arm and dropped it around the shoulders of the boy ... person ... beside her, displaying obvious breast tissue.

"Who?" she asked.

"Matthew. Medical student, gay?" I asked. Henry was going to grow up to be just like this, I could tell.

"Yeah," someone with wispy facial hair said. "Upstairs."

They turned their attention away from me, so I stepped over the snaking ADSL cabling and climbed the stairs. Sure, I'd been a drug-fucked student myself, at least for as long as

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

it took for me to work out that I'd fail unless I did some work, but I didn't remember ever being that out of it.

F, on the other hand, had presumably spent his entire medical degree off his face.

There was no answer when I tapped on Matthew's door so I pushed the door open carefully. Matthew was asleep on the mattress on the floor, reading lamp on the floor beside him, Medical Microbiology, by Mims and sycophants, on the pillow beside him.

There was an inarticulate shout from downstairs and I pushed the door closed again and kicked my shoes off. Matthew didn't stir as I stepped onto the futon and carefully lay down on the bunched-up sheet beside him. He was obviously exhausted; I could wait for him to wake up.

My pager vibrated on my hip, and I ignored it, and got to my cell phone and turned it off before the hospital called to see why I hadn't answered my pager.

This was what had put me off fucking fellow medical types; it always felt like there was a third person (or on one memorable occasion, a fourth) in the bed with you. Someone who would page you at random, who wanted to swab you for MRSA during sex, someone that thought you actually wanted to work a weekend shift. Nobody in their right mind would sleep with a doctor, not even another doctor.

Not that sharing my life with a musician had actually been any easier. Never share a house with someone who plays an amplified instrument, and if you have to, disable the amp at bedtime each night. That little fuse is your friend. Never travel with someone who insists their instrument has to sit on

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

their lap the whole time, especially if you have a child with them. For that matter, never travel with a child either.

Lying there, listening to Matthew breathe, listening to the rise and fall of voices from downstairs, and the sound of distressed plumbing somewhere in the building, was peaceful. I wasn't sleepy; I'd stopped feeling tired sometime during my first year as a fuckwit house physician. The bit of me that was supposed to warn me about exhaustion had burnt out years ago, like an asthmatic's central respiratory chemoreceptors no longer responding to falls in the partial pressure of carbon dioxide in arterial blood.

Some time later—I wasn't sure how long, but it was long enough that I had become so bored that reading Mims and the sycophants had begun to seem appealing—Matthew stretched and stirred and rolled over to settle against me.

"You're here," he said sleepily. Sleepy people are allowed to state the obvious.

"Yeah. Didn't want to wake you up." He was warm against my skin, even through the layers of clothing between us, and the reading light flickered as the electrical wiring in the house struggled with the load of the stereo that had just been turned on downstairs. "How do you manage to sleep here?" I asked him.

"Earplugs," he said.

Matthew moved, leaning across to kiss me, and I could feel the hard ridge of his cock through the layers of clothing. God, I remembered what it was like to be that young, then his fingers found the buttons of my jeans, and I didn't feel quite so old any more.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Things were just starting to get interesting when there was smash of breaking glass, and a shrill scream from downstairs, audible over the music.

"Matthew!" someone shouted, and we both took off out of the room and down the stairs.

Whoever the stupid fuck was that decided forty years ago that sliding glass doors were fashionable should fucking well have to come and clean up this sort of mess.

"Turn the music off!" I shouted, and I squatted down beside the young woman, who was kneeling down amidst the shattered glass, blood welling freely from her arm.

Matthew handed me a pair of latex gloves, and I had a vague memory now of there being some beside the bed. "Call an ambulance, tell them it's a hemorrhage," I said. I peeled the girl's hand off her arm, and silence descended on the house.

She was sobbing, quite reasonably in my opinion considering the mess she'd made of the tendons in her arm, and I said, "I'm a doctor. Let me have a look."

Oh, yeah, great chunks of glass in her arm. I couldn't apply pressure until the worst of them were out, so I grabbed the bits I could see and pulled them out. Matthew was doing the right thing, gloves on, too, soothing the woman, who was called Heidi, trying to stop her from pulling at her arm. There must have been people standing around, but if they didn't get in the way, I wasn't interested in them.

The big shards came out easily enough, and there was fuck all I could do about the smaller bits without some decent supplies, so I took the wadded-up shirt Matthew handed me,

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

and pushed the ragged edges of the wound together as well as I could, then wrapped the shirt around the girl's arm and clamped my hand over the top. There was blood welling up through the fabric, but I'd be damned if I was going to try do anything as fancy as tie off an artery when there was an ambulance a few minutes away.

"Do you have a medical kit in your car?" Matthew asked me, and I shook my head. Medical kits were for doctors who didn't get pissed off at them being stolen all the time, not for me.

The losers in the house must have rubbed their mutual brain cells together, because they carried the mattress from the living room over, and we lifted Heidi onto it. This was an improvement. With Heidi lying down, I could get some decent elevation on the arm and have a better chance of slowing the blood loss.

"Have you got an IV catheter kit here?" I asked Matthew, and he nodded and bolted back up the stairs. I'd hoped he would have; like the NGTs it was something he could reasonably be expected to practice on himself. And if I could get a line in ready for the paramedics, it would speed things up for them, and if Heidi lost enough blood that her veins went flat, an existing line could make all the difference...

Matthew was back in a moment, handing me a bundle of equipment. "Take over," I said. Matthew's hands clamped over mine, and I slid mine out.

Jesus Christ, we were both awash with blood now.

I ripped the catheter kit open and put it on the bed beside Heidi, who was starting to look a little shocky. Damn, but I

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

didn't want to be doing this, and I supposed Heidi probably felt the same way, too.

The IV catheter went in first go. That was one of the advantages of general medicine; I'd spent all my training putting IV lines into people with dodgy veins. Kind of like anesthetics, only nobody had ever sued me.

"I don't suppose you've stolen some Ringer's Lactate and a giving set, too?" I asked Matthew.

He shook his head. "Sorry. No IV fluids at all. We're actively discouraged from stealing expensive stuff."

Oh, yeah, that would be me lecturing them about the cost of stock.

Now I had my hands free I checked Heidi over quickly. She was conscious, and looking panicked, so I nodded reassuringly. Pulse was fast and thready, but that could just be the fear and pain, not the blood loss.

I checked her arm where Matthew's hands were clamped so tightly over my poor green shirt that his knuckles were white. The shirt was soaked through completely and blood was seeping down her arm. Figure a cup in the shirt, another cup on the mattress, and one on the floor. She was going to be running out of blood volume soon.

"How long?" I asked Matthew.

"Four minutes," he said.

Damn, we had another five or so to wait for an ambulance.

I grabbed the cleanest looking housemate and got him to hold Heidi's legs up with his hands. Heidi was breathing fast now; hypovolemic shock was a bitch.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

We waited. I'd learnt something about detachment during my miserable ER rotation, and there was a certain comfort in finding that it was still there, just waiting for someone to bleed all over me.

I looked at Matthew's face. He was completely focused on Heidi, and it took me a moment to realise he was counting her respirations. I felt for her pulse in her wrist, and it was there still. Good, she hadn't lost so much blood pressure that her peripheral pulses were gone.

There were sirens outside. Sirens were good. Then two burly looking men in the St. John's green uniform were kneeling down beside Heidi.

"I'm a doctor," I said. "There's tendon and artery damage, vitals are off. I put an IV catheter in for you."

They took over, giving Heidi oxygen and doing something about fluid volume replacement immediately, then moving her onto their portable gurney.

"I suppose you want me to ride with her, don't you?" I said, knowing it was inevitable. No paramedic was going to turn down the chance to shift legal responsibility to a doctor if they could.

When they lifted Heidi's gurney up, I stood, my knees creaking, and tossed my keys to Matthew. He looked a bit shell-shocked, standing there shirtless, blood liberally smeared over him. Not quite what I had in mind for a date.

He nodded and clutched the keys in his hand, and I followed the paramedics out into the London night.

Chapter Thirteen

Somehow, once I'd found Andrew's old Morris, I wished that I'd mentioned that I hadn't driven for several months, and that the last time I'd touched a manual car was when I'd sat my driver's test. Good thing he didn't have a fancy car.

As I unlocked it, the streetlight showed the rust eating the door away, and I felt better. I could probably drive it into a fence, and it wouldn't matter.

I discovered I didn't actually know the direct route to the hospital from my house, and was obliged to follow the bus route to get there. Hopefully it wasn't too far out of the way.

Once there, I smiled to myself and pulled into the multi-storey car park attached to the hospital and into one of the bays reserved for doctors. So this was what intellectual privilege felt like. I could get used to a guaranteed parking bay. Hell, I could get used to a car.

I pushed my backpack out of sight behind the passenger seat, just to discourage anyone from stealing my laptop, and locked the car up. Casualty wasn't that hard to find, and I had my med student ID with me, ready for the next day, so the sour-looking nurse on the Triage desk buzzed me through the security doors without even checking my name. More privilege. Personally, I wouldn't have let anyone who had quite as much blood on their arms and trousers as I did into Casualty without a good explanation, but maybe it was a slow night.

Or not. I stepped into a maelstrom and found myself pressed against a wall as I avoided being flattened by an X-

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

ray tech pushing a trolley. I could tell they were an X-ray tech by the radiation monitoring tag on their uniform and the way they fluoresced ever so slightly. And the demented way they pushed the trolley.

A nurse glared at me and said, "Who the fuck are you?"

I held up my med student badge. "I'm looking for Dr. Maynard."

The nurse stared at me for a moment, and I could almost hear the cogs whirring in his head. "Oh," he said. "In the staff room." He pointed at a raised glass-walled room in the centre of Casualty.

"Thanks." I dodged the orderly wheeling an oxygen cylinder down the corridor, skirted the banked up row of patient-laden trolleys, stepped up into the nurse's station and pushed the staff room door open.

My head had built a picture of a soulless room with a coffee-ring-stained table and plastic chairs, but the staff room was obviously an administrative area, with long benches covered in stacks of X-rays and pathology printouts, lined with monitors and keyboards, lit by the fluorescent light of the X-ray screens.

Andrew was seated at one of the monitors, feet up on the desk beside the keyboard, wearing hospital scrubs instead of the blood-soaked jeans and T-shirt I'd last seen him in. He looked up and smiled at me as I walked in.

"Blake," he said. "Thanks for coming to get me. Heidi's going to be fine; she's gone up to surgery already. Let's get out of here before they have some kind of crisis and we wind up working."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He picked up a blue hospital plastic bag full of clothes and led me out of Casualty, chatting to me innocuously about his experiences as a medical student, and I figured that he was right; no one would pay any attention to me turning up to collect him caked in blood.

In the corridor outside Casualty, I said, "Is Heidi really going to be all right? It looked like she'd lost a lot of blood."

Andrew nodded and smiled sideways at me as we pushed our way through a gaggle of relatives who were blocking the hallway.

"She's had a bag of Ringer's Lactate and a couple of units of blood, just to make sure she's up to surgery, then they emptied her stomach of pizza and beer and shipped her off to OR to have the tendons repaired. She didn't need to have an MTP or anything. I've spoken to her mum on the phone, and she's on her way down here. Want some food? I was planning on a decent meal, but I think I'm too hungry to wait for that."

I was hungry, and still kind of wired from the accident. "Sure," I said, and we headed for the cafeteria.

It was late enough that only one of the kiosks were still open, the obligatory junk food outlet, and I yawned and stretched and ordered the same as Andrew; the breakfast special.

The dining area was mostly empty now, well after most people's meal break, and I ate my plate of bacon, eggs and beans in a rush before I looked closely at the other people lingering over their meals.

"Why are most of the people here homeless?" I asked Andrew.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He bit into his toast and looked around the room. "Food's cheap," he said. "Security leaves them alone until it's lock-up time."

I looked at the grime-caked man swathed in innumerable layers of clothing at the next table who was eating packets of sugar, and then at the sign over the drinking fountain. 'This fountain is not a sink'. The sign had puzzled me on my first day here, but it kind of made sense that people would need to be told that now.

Andrew smiled at me wryly.

I handed him the keys in the car park and said, "You drive. You don't want to know what I did to your clutch driving here."

There was something about how Andrew looked at me as he took the keys that made my stomach lurch. "Security cameras," he said, and he unlocked the car and got in, then leaned across and unlocked my door from inside.

I slid down in my seat and put my feet on his dashboard, and Andrew leaned across and kissed me.

"You okay?" he asked, and he touched my face gently.

Was I okay?

"Fuck, what if you hadn't been there?" I said, and his fingers slid into my hair.

"You would have done exactly what I did, except possibly for putting the IV access in. Heidi would still have been okay," he said reassuringly, then we were kissing, slow, coaxing kisses.

I melted. He tasted of bacon and egg and himself, and the metallic smell puzzled me until I realised it was Heidi's blood I

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

could smell on him, and on myself. That was a little creepy. His hand was sliding under my T-shirt, and across the flaking patches of dried blood on my chest, and it didn't stop me from finding his cock through his scrubs.

He pulled back a little shakily and I could see his teeth and lips shining in the car park lights. "How about we go back to my place and shower?" he said, and it sounded like a damned good idea.

"You think we've had enough sex in a public place for one night?" I asked.

Andrew chuckled and nodded. "Oh, yeah, let's go somewhere private for a change."

Chapter Fourteen

There was a real luxury in leaning back against the tiles and letting someone else scrub the dried blood out of my pores and the creases of my skin. Matthew's hands were gentle, and there was nothing sexual about the slide of the wash cloth down my arm, but my body was miles ahead of us, taking each stroke of my skin and completely misinterpreting it, leaving me hard, stomach muscles fluttering as Matthew pressed kisses against my belly.

When we'd come home, I'd cracked a bottle of chenin blanc for us, cranked the central heating all the way up, and had been standing here, under the stream of hot water, while Matthew drove me completely crazy, long enough that the taste of the wine was fading.

Not a bad thing in itself, not when Matthew stood up again and kissed me, replacing the taste with his lips and tongue.

Fuck, I could see the headspace he was in, feel it in his fingers as they brushed across my neck, pressing briefly against my carotid, thyroid cartilage, then larynx. "Go and make sure you're clean," he said, turning the shower taps off. "I'll wait in the bedroom for you."

When I walked into my bedroom, Matthew was standing beside the bed, towel wrapped around his hips, his hair dripping still. The top drawer of the nightstand was open, and when he looked up from studying its contents, I knew my cover was blown.

There wasn't anything particularly incriminating there, no porn or toys, not with a pre-pubescent son that lived with me

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

some of the time, but there was enough for Matthew to put the pieces together obviously.

He undid his towel and tossed it on the bed, and he was rock hard and naked and so utterly gorgeous that breathing was difficult. He picked up one of the packs of gloves and undid it, laying the sterile package out on the nightstand. Part of my brain was still on the same planet as the rest of humanity because I noticed that he put the first glove on with the correct technique, sliding his hand in without touching the outside. The second glove went on right, too, fingers of the first hand inside the cuff, the quick wriggle of his hand, then the casual sorting out of fingers. There was a snap of latex on skin and I thought my knees would fail.

Fuck.

He tossed a strip of condoms onto the bed and pointed at his abandoned towel.

I crawled every inch of the way.

The mattress sagged under his weight, but I kept my eyes closed tight. I didn't want to see him, didn't want him to see me either; I was too naked for this.

Latex-clad fingertips trailed softly up my spine and Matthew's lips brushed over my ear, the damp tails of his hair tickling over my shoulder and neck. "Shh," he said, and his fingers traced circles over my scapula.

There was a way to do this, to surrender, and I let myself just feel Matthew's fingers as they traced down my back. Trapezius, latisimus dorsi, ridge of my scapula, teres major, teres minor, deltoid. He circled again and the tension ebbed out of me. Third circle, and my eyes were open and the tiny

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

check pattern of my quilt and the rough ecru loops of the towel swam in front my eyes.

"That's better," he whispered. "No one else will ever know about this, I promise you." C2, C7, down my nuchal line, iliac crest, sacrum.

Downy hair became coarser. I exhaled slowly, deeply, and the mattress moved again.

I could wait.

Click. That was the cap of the lube. Squelch. Oh, yeah.

Long, long pause, and I could almost hear the rub of lube over latex as Matthew warmed the liquid for me. It made me smile.

Matthew chuckled, this warm sound beside my ear, then he kissed my cheek and settled back onto the bed close beside me.

The lube was cool, not cold, when Matthew trailed his fingers down the crack of my ass.

His breathing was slow and deep in the quiet room, over the faint hiss of the central heating, and his fingers traced the ridged skin.

Desire crept out, stood between me and the bedside light, casting its shadow over me, and one finger slid in easily.

"Oh, fuck," I said.

I thought he'd make me turn over, make me even more vulnerable, but he didn't. His finger see-sawed in and out and the towel was rough underneath me when I rocked my hips involuntarily.

"You'll hurt yourself," he said, and he licked his tongue over my ear. Helix, triangular fossa, concha, lobule, tragus.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Two fingers. He was right; rubbing against the towel was going to hurt. I stilled my hips while I could.

The world shrunk in. I stopped being able to name the places that Matthew was kissing me, touching me. He didn't touch me **there**, though there would soon be a time when he wouldn't be able to avoid it. He was biting me now, moaning, too, and my back was slick with sweat. I could feel it trickling down my ribs.

He changed angles, pulled back, slid in with three fingers. I started to fall apart, clutched at the bedding, ground down, and then back onto his hand.

He stopped, added more lube one-handed, and it was cold and sharp and slippery and stinging and so fucking good. Matthew may have made a hell of a lot of noise earlier in the bar, but I was matching him now. This was beyond sexual, far too intense to only be about arousal or pleasure. This was all of me, and there was nothing else that did this to me.

Four fingers now, and there was no way Matthew could miss hitting the right spot inside me, but he didn't give me a chance to adjust, just pulled his hand back, bunched his fingers tight, and pushed back in.

I yelled, top-of-my-lungs hollered, and was vaguely aware of Matthew laughing, then the pressure was over. I was completely overloaded with endorphins, blissed out, floating now, boneless, smiling beatifically, no doubt. F could keep his chemicals; they were no match for this place.

I couldn't come like this; hell, I couldn't talk or move, could barely breathe, and Matthew slid his hand back out.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Wait for me," he said, and he grabbed a condom and ripped the pack open while I rolled over, an inane smile on my face.

Taking him was nothing, though he was still considerate enough to go slow, presumably just in case I was sore.

I wasn't; just kind of raw. There was a reason I had the very best lube there was in my drawer.

I didn't last, didn't have a chance, just came the instant he was inside me and kissing me, and it was the sort of orgasm that was blinding in its intensity. I came with all of me, every pore, every cubic centimeter of air in my lungs, every drop of fluid in my body, came utterly and completely.

It left me stupefied. I couldn't do anything except grin back at Matthew and loop one anaesthetised hand around his neck and pull him down onto me.

Matthew grimaced, bit at his bottom lip, lifted himself up a little on his elbows, and I got to watch his face, entranced, while he came.

He slumped heavily onto me, making me grunt, "Oof," then slid a hand between us to grab the condom as he slipped out.

I could get both of my arms to move enough to wrap them around him as I let out a long breath. There wasn't anything to say; there never was after sex like this.

Chapter Fifteen

Andrew was pretty much out of it, sprawled across the bed with a stupefied look on his face, so I kissed him and rolled off the bed. I bundled the gloves and condom up and dropped them in the bin in the bathroom, had a quick shower to rinse the lube off myself, and put Andrew's bathrobe on.

It smelled of him, more so than even his sheets, and I must admit I smiled and buried my face in the collar as I made my way down the stairs.

Who would have thought that Andrew would be into fisting like that? Guess he wouldn't want to wander around the hospital with a red bandana hanging out of his right pocket; someone would be bound to get it.

The bottle of wine was still half full, so I gathered up the bottle and glasses, and my backpack, and went back upstairs.

Andrew hadn't moved, so I just let him be and stacked the pillows up against the bed head and opened my laptop. I'd started in on the revision questions, and was struggling with attempting to condense management of cystic fibrosis down to four paragraphs, when Andrew finally stirred.

"Ngghh," he said, and he rolled over. Fuck, he was beautiful, the way he looked at me.

"Hey. You all right? Want some wine?"

"Yeah." I figured he was replying to both questions, and held out a glass of wine as he struggled to sit up.

He spread the towel underneath himself and sat up against the bed head beside me, taking the wine. He looked out of it still, and I could understand that. It took a little while to get

back to normal after a really intense fisting—after anything that intense.

My fingers intertwined with his, and he let out a long breath. He was right; it had been a long night.

"Was I bleeding?" he asked.

"No more than expected," I said. "No tears. Next time, though, we do that with some poppers."

Andrew laughed and squeezed my fingers. "Babe, at least one of us in this bed is a doctor. Tizanidine is what we need, not poppers."

I looked at Andrew with the dawning realization that he was right; my days of using illicit drugs when there was a prescription alternative available were drawing to a close. "Tizanidine?" I retrieved my hand from his and opened the pharmacology database on the laptop.

"Short-acting," he said. "Not a restricted drug, so no one counts them closely. Won't fuck me over so much that I can't work the next day. Not a benzo, so it's not addictive."

I was stunned. There was a whole world of substance abuse that I knew nothing about. My housemates often asked about drugs, but I'd always approached it from the angle of trying to find something that was analogous to a street drug. This was different.

"Fuck," I said. "What else am I missing out on?"

Andrew's hand slid up my thigh. "Dunno," he said. "F is the expert on misusing drugs. I just remember that last time I wrote someone up for Tizanidine, it caught my attention. Hadn't expected to wind up being fisted quite this quickly, though. What gave me away?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

There had been that moment of insight, wild supposition, and Andrew had been so utterly submissive that I'd been sure a moment later. "It was the gloves in the drawer. You had powderless gloves there, and there's only one thing you absolutely have to have powderless gloves for."

I put the laptop aside and slid down the bed to lie beside Andrew. His hand was stroking me now, coaxing me back to hardness. I closed my eyes for a moment, and he kissed me. "Sorry, am I distracting you?" he murmured.

"Mmm, yeah. I think you're supposed to be supportive of my studying, aren't you?"

Andrew's mouth was pressed against my neck now, sucking on the skin. "I guess so," he said. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Tell me what you know about erectile dysfunction," I said, and we both burst out laughing.

"Point taken," he said and he let go of me. "I'll go get some work of my own and leave you alone."

Andrew fell asleep some time later, slumped down in the bed, photocopied documents on wrongful dismissal cases strewn across the blankets, and I didn't disturb him. It was only the fear of impending failure that stopped me from turning the laptop and light off and going to sleep, too. I was pathetically behind with revision, there was a mountain of stuff I needed to do for my placement, and I was hopelessly short of time, too. It was an appalling time to get involved with a new lover.

Andrew woke when I finally turned off the laptop and put it away, and he stumbled sleepily to the bathroom to brush his

teeth when I went to the loo. I'd never really done the whole domesticity thing before, had prided myself on avoiding romantic entanglements even when I'd been seeing someone, and was caught completely by surprise when Andrew said, "You can leave a toothbrush and razor here if you want."

Stunned wasn't an adequate description of how I felt, and I guess I must have been staring at him like an idiot.

Andrew's fingers curled around the back of my neck gently and he smiled at me, then kissed me quickly, tasting of mint.

"Hey," he said. "You don't have to. I am, however, amused that you cope beautifully with powderless gloves, but look like I've kicked you when I suggest you might actually be back here again, maybe even on a regular basis."

"Fuck," I managed to say, and it did nothing to help with the idiot status. "Um, yeah, that would be good." All right, I was being less of an idiot now. Hopefully.

Andrew kissed me again, and his stubble was rough on my cheek. "And before you have a panic attack over this, I've got Henry staying all this weekend, so I can't see you again until next week."

"I wasn't going to have an anxiety attack," I said defensively.

"Sure," Andrew said, and he grabbed my arse as he walked past me. "You'll be pleased to hear that I don't have to be at work until eight tomorrow, so the alarm is set for six thirty."

I leaned my forehead against the mirror. "Twit," I muttered to myself.

"I heard that," Andrew called out from the bedroom.

Chapter Sixteen

All hell broke loose the next day.

I'd left Matthew sitting at a bus stop not far from my place and driven in.

The Troll was waiting for me, simpering, a hand full of messages, when I tried to sidle past her desk. "Dr. Seagate is here to see you."

I filed the scraps of paper into a pocket without reading them and waved to F where he was lounging against my office door. He looked like shit.

"What's up?" I asked, unlocking the door.

"Feces," he said. "Diced and tossed through the air very fast." He kicked the door shut and slumped down in my plastic garden chair. "You need to become a consultant, that way you'd have a comfortable chair for me."

"So, the shit's hit the fan. What in particular has gone wrong?" I ignored the jibe about being a consultant. My American medical degree just wasn't classy enough for the British medical system; I was never going to make consultant here.

"God was waiting for me in my office this morning."

"Yuck," I said. God never ventured out of his office without a damn good reason; he much preferred to summon intransigent doctors to his offices.

"He asked me to resign to save the hospital the embarrassment of having to fire me."

I was impressed. F had obviously seriously pissed someone off. "Are you going to?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"No fucking way," F said. "If I quit, I can't claim wrongful dismissal. Bastards aren't going to get rid of me that easily."

I nodded. My thoughts had been heading down that path, too. "What are you going to do?"

F smiled, kind of like a shark would. "I've left a message with the BMA rep. This is war. The administration here can't prevent me from doing my job the right way, then punish me when I do it the wrong way. It's not actually my responsibility if their budget is fucked. Getting the best care I can for my patients is my responsibility."

I mimed putting on a cowboy hat and spinning a six-shooter and drawled, "Them there's fighting words, pardner."

F laughed, making him sound kind of manic. "I'd watch that American accent of yours," he said. "According to Lena, who is an integral part of the gossip network here, there's some young thing in High Dependency who's enthusing about the lovely American doctor that her housemate is shagging that saved her when she ripped her arm to bits. What have you been up to, you naughty doctor?"

I went hot, then cold, and swallowed hard.

"Ah," F said. "In the midst of the ruination of my career, you've been indulging a little. I want details."

F wagged his eyebrows at me, and I couldn't help but smile. "I was at Matthew's place last night and one of his drunken and/or stoned housemates shredded her arm on a glass door. I really didn't have much choice but to ride in the bus here with her."

"Matthew? Cute name. How is the adorable Matthew?" F asked.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Matthew is fine. Can we change the subject?" I really didn't want to go into how fine he was, not when my whole body was still suffused with contentment from last night.

F was grinning at me like the idiot he was, but I had no intention of elaborating on my sexual adventures. For a start, if I did, F might decide to return the confidence and tell me in excruciating detail about his sex life, too, and I really didn't feel up to it.

F waited, and I sighed and said, "Go away F. You're cluttering up my office, and while you might be about to be fired, I'm not, and I have a batch of med students I need to keep occupied before the nurses kill them."

"Don't forget your private tutoring," F said with a leer, but he did peel himself off the plastic chair and wander out of my office.

* * * *

I sat down at the table, feeling tired, and glanced around at the gathered fresh-faced med students. Nevins was still cheerful, and he looked less of an idiot than usual. Lin looked studious; the blonde girl as tired as me; Matthew was as gorgeous as always, but I didn't let myself stare at him too closely. "Okay," I said, tossing a handful of index cards on the table. "Take one at random. This afternoon, I want to know all about the condition, what the treatment options are; the usual drill. Let's do some work."

I left the kids attempting to put together a trolley for an IDC insertion and answered a call from F.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I could hear the steady clunk-clunk of equipment in the background when he spoke so he must have been calling from the dialysis unit.

"Wassup?" I asked.

"BMA rep. Stop work meeting this afternoon. We're walking off the job."

I closed my eyes for a moment, and my stomach plummeted. So it had come to that? "Okay," I said. "When?"

"Five p.m.. See you there."

"Yeah," I said, and I put my phone away.

Chapter Seventeen

Andrew was sitting at a table of doctors, all of them involved in an intense conversation, with their heads pressed close together, when I walked past at lunch time, but he looked up and smiled at me. "Blake," he said, and he nodded at an empty chair.

I sat down, papers, empty pear tin and olive jar in my hand, and wondered if he'd recognise them as being from his cupboards. Hopefully I'd get a chance to ask him about the assignment. Evidence-based medicine struck me as something else that Andrew would have opinions on. I suspected he was actually composed almost entirely of opinions. And submission.

Everyone else ignored me and went back to their conversation, apart from Dr. Seagate, who I recognised from the BMA meeting. He stared at me for a moment, until someone in scrubs threw a marshmallow at him to get his attention.

"...wider responsibility," the man in scrubs said. "As members of the profession, we're looking at a question of the greater good."

"Greater good is shit," Andrew said. "Our primary responsibility is to our patients right this moment. Not to the ones that will come later, not to other people's patients."

"If this is an NHS-wide crisis, then aren't we compelled to take action?" a woman asked.

"Given that I trained in a system where there was minimal free healthcare, I'm probably not the best person to speak on

this," Andrew said. "Hell, I can't even vote here. In the short term we need to voice our support for F, who was after all just doing what any of us would do, and to keep caring for our patients. Long term, we need a broad-based community response. Someone who is a citizen needs to actually **do** something, run for parliament or seize control of their local Labour party branch."

"Are you advocating that we don't stop work?" the woman asked Andrew, and I could feel my jaw dropping open. They were going to strike?

"No," Andrew said. "I think that we have to give the hospital enough notice to staff the wards with locums. I think we can quite reasonably stop non-essential work."

"Monday?" Dr. Seagate asked.

Andrew nodded. "That should be long enough for admin to get back-ups in. It'll cost them a fortune to staff the wards for eight hours, which will get their attention."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Doctors didn't strike. "Will it harm the patients?" I asked, making everyone look at me for the first time. Hell, I was going to be a doctor soon; I wanted to know about this shit.

Dr. Seagate said, "I was a medical student at the time of the Irish strike of '87. There was no increased morbidity or mortality from the strike, but that was only the junior doctors who were on strike that time. Registrars and consultants remained on the wards. Unlike then, we're just one hospital; we're not taking the entire profession out with us."

"So we need to notify Homerton and St. Andrews. They get our emergency cases; we maintain skeleton staffing on the

wards. As long as we don't remain on strike, we can be pretty sure that the only people we'll inconvenience will be the admin and God."

God? Andrew was worrying about inconveniencing God?

The man in scrubs said, "Andrew, you're confusing your med student."

Andrew chuckled. "Relax, Blake, God is the director of medical services."

"Are you really all going to strike? Has it happened before?" I asked, still trying to get my head around the idea.

"Looks like it," Andrew said. "It has happened. Canadian doctors went on strike in 2002, Los Angeles doctors in '76. Israel had a major countrywide strike that lasted for four months in '83. British doctors went on strike in the 70s." He tapped my stack of printouts. "If you research the issue, you'll find plenty of references to mortality and morbidity falling during a strike. The figures are crap, don't believe them. There is a temporary drop because of no elective surgery, but as soon as surgery restarts, the figures come back up, and nobody is prepared to talk about the overall impact on quality of life of that delay."

I nodded, and he looked at the papers in front of me. "Hospital policy statements?" he asked, taking the stack off me, and I tried hard not to colour. It was hard to match the way he intimidated me like this with the man who had given himself so completely the night before.

"Yeah. I was, um, looking at the, um, policy of using evidence-based medicine. I went looking for journal articles

and they weren't in the database because they were anecdotal."

Andrew was nodding approvingly when I looked up again. "Excellent. This is instead of the presentation I asked you to prepare?"

I nodded. I was in the shit, no way around it.

"Tie it to the topic I gave you, and that'll be fine." He handed the printouts back to me. "I've got a copy of Callahan in my office if you want to borrow it now." He checked his watch. "I've got a few minutes before I'm due at outpatients."

I gathered up my papers, jar, and tin, and waited while Andrew said a round of 'goodbyes' to the doctors and Dr. Seagate threw marshmallows at him, then Andrew strode past me, muttering, "I've got twenty minutes, think we can manage it?"

I took off after him. "No problems," I said, pushing past the gaggle of nurses at the cafeteria entrance.

Chapter Eighteen

The Rottweiler was painting her nails at her desk as I pushed open the door to the offices, Matthew right behind me. I took the handful of messages she thrust at me, tiny slivers of red crescents marking them, and said over my shoulder to Matthew as I led him to my office, "I'm not happy about this, Blake. I hadn't planned on spending my lunch break dealing with your crises."

"Sorry, Dr. Maynard," Matthew said, plaintively. "It's a family matter..."

I unlocked my door, ignoring the beady eyes that had followed us down the hall. "In you go," I said, holding the door for Matthew.

There was a lock on my office door, but it only worked from the outside, presumably cunningly arranged by the hospital to stop its staff from having sex on company time, but I closed my blinds, then wedged rolled up photocopies firmly under the door. Of course, if I was a consultant, my office would lock from the inside, and then I, too, could disconnect the smoke detector and smoke joints in it.

When I slid my hands around the back of Matthew's neck and pulled him close, Matthew said, "You're not serious about this, are you?"

"Oh, yeah," I murmured against his ear. "Completely serious. I'm not going to see you until Monday at the earliest..." I kissed his neck, sliding my lips across his skin, inhaling the scent of him. "Not that I wouldn't rather be safely

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

in bed with you, preferably at my place where there are no drunken housemates, but I'd settle for your place if I had to."

Matthew's hands pulled the stethoscope from around my neck and tossed it onto the floor. I made a mental note to tell him how much a Littman digital cost one day, then his hands were unbuckling my trousers, and I had to bite my lip to stifle my moan.

Fuck it. I could always buy another stethoscope.

He was hard, too, and I could feel the bead of his piercing through his trousers, then my hands were sliding inside his trousers, and he was there, rock hard in my hands.

He kissed me deep, long and hard, and I pushed his trousers and underwear down roughly, then picked him up and deposited him on top of the mess on my desk. Stuff fell off the sides, coffee cups and paper and books, and I bent down and rummaged around in my briefcase for lube and condoms.

He rolled his own condom on, easing it over the beads, then I took him into my mouth; deep, long, and hard, too, his moans muffled by his hand. This was good, more than good, and I ignored the footsteps in the hall outside and the sound of traffic coming through the window glass.

What mattered was this, and right then I would have given anything to really taste Matthew, for him to come in my mouth. I thought of platitudes, and discarded them, and eased my fingers between Matthew's thighs, into the creases and grooves of his body. Over the acrid latex, I could smell him so clearly, his sweat thick and cloudy, and slick under my fingers.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He spread his legs, more than enough invitation for me, so I grabbed examination gloves from the box on my desk. They weren't as good as sterile gloves, but I wasn't planning on leaving the office to hunt some down. I cupped his balls, toyed with his raphe briefly, just a brush of a finger, then pressed fingertips against his ass.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Cecelia next door was singing 'Killing Me Softly,' and it occurred to me that Fox and Gimpel would probably kill her, and not very softly, for what she was doing to their precious song.

I wasn't going to push my fingers inside Matthew, not without lube, and when I lifted my mouth from his cock he was holding the lube ready for me.

Fuck, he was so beautiful, lips parted, tip of his tongue showing, and I kept my eyes on his face while I pushed two fingers slowly inside him.

You think I'd be over the wonder of this, considering it was pretty much what I did professionally, but Matthew whimpered and pouted and kissed me, and I could have spent all day on that desk, finger-fucking him slowly until we both went insane, but we were under time constraints here, and the insanity needed to happen faster than that.

The feeling of the latex rolling down my cock was almost enough to make me scream, then Matthew smeared lube down the length of my cock.

"I'm ready," he whispered, and he lay back across my desk

Cecelia was murdering John Denver next door, proving herself remarkably sentimental for an oncologist. "...true

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

yesterday la la tomorrow is open la la seems to la la just to be..." she sang, and I pushed slowly into Matthew, infinitesimally slowly, and then there was that moment where the head of my cock eased into him.

I groaned and held still, and Matthew's eyes were closed and his mouth open, and he was breathing hard. I leaned forward, kissed his neck, whispered something, and began the slow sweet slide, deeper, until I was all the way in.

Matthew was trembling now, biting on the side of his hand, and I held still.

Cecelia sang, "...lost and la la on some..." and I was sure she had the order of the lyrics wrong. I thought briefly about buying her a book of lyrics for Christmas, but decided that might just encourage her. Perhaps I should buy her singing lessons?

Matthew whispered, "All right, you can move now," and I stopped trying to distract myself.

I leaned forward, grabbed Matthew, pulled him a little closer to the edge of the desk, sending more stuff tumbling onto the utilitarian carpet tiles. We might have been better off on the floor, might have done less damage there, but it was a bit late to be thinking of that.

This had to be slow; anything faster would send the desk thudding into the wall of the office. Fuck, but it felt good to be buried inside someone, inside Matthew. I hadn't done this for a long time and it felt delicious. Matthew was so tight and hot around me, and he was squirming on top of the slew of photocopies, keeping himself quiet with one hand, stroking his cock with the other.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I hitched my shirttails up a little higher, trying to keep them out of the lube, and concentrated on making each stroke as deep and as slow as my self-control would let me.

Matthew's shirt had ridden up, leaving his belly exposed, and it was this more than anything that began to undo me. I'd touched that skin, kissed that tattoo, come over it, slept with it pressed against my lower back ... I took a deep breath, ran my fingers over the velvet skin and began to come, long slow waves that shook me, that made me clench my jaws tight to keep myself silent.

Cecelia had moved onto ABBA now, "...empty house la la tears la lala..." and I held onto the edge of the condom and pulled out slowly, then leaned forward and took Matthew's cock into my mouth.

He moaned and clutched at my hair and I sucked him hard and he came almost instantly, thrashing around on the desk, causing more destruction, and I held onto his hips tightly, trying to still him.

He didn't make too much noise, not like at the bar, and I stood up.

Oh, yeah, this was the unattractive, partly dressed man with a loaded condom dangling from his cock look. I dumped the condom and gloves into my rubbish bin and pulled my boxers and trousers up while Matthew struggled up to a sitting position.

"Fuck," he whispered. "That was hot."

I helped him to his feet and he wobbled unsteadily.

"Yeah," I said, and I kissed him.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Two minutes later we left an office that looked like it had been vandalised, and I followed Matthew out past The Menopausal Monster and back to work.

Chapter Nineteen

Just fucked was not the right way to be when you're being drilled on anesthetics in theatre so I made myself focus on propofol and sevoflurane and tried to remember not to lean against anything and contaminate it.

When I looked down, Nevins and Lin were holding hands behind their backs, acting innocent, and it was so sweet that I couldn't help but smile.

"You!" the anesthetist said, pointing at me. "Tell me about why isoflurane has been phased out."

That would serve me right for letting my attention wander, wouldn't it?

"Isoflurane is pungent and can irritate the respiratory system, so is rarely used in Britain. But, in Third World countries, it's still the inhaled anesthetic of choice because the patent on it has lapsed so it's the most economical of the halogenated ethers."

He moved his attention to Nevins and said, "Ether isn't patented either. Why don't we use ether?"

"Because it's flammable," Nevins said. "And that can't be a good thing."

The anesthetist chuckled. "It can't, you're right. Now, you're going to be expected to handle a diathermy machine, too. Let's move onto that."

* * * *

Dr. M wasn't in the staff room we used for tutorials when we wandered in, and it was a relief to be able to sit down and

hold a cup of coffee stolen from the ward pantry in my hands for a while. Lin was running over her schizophrenia presentation, Nevins had his nose buried in our anesthetics text, everyone else was chatting or eating snacks.

I had the printouts from the librarian with me, but I still wasn't sure what I wanted to say. I certainly couldn't say anything intelligible about decubitus ulcers. It seemed pointless to waffle on about prevention since the hospital statistics indicated that almost all the patients with ulcers already had them when they arrived here.

Andrew pushed the door open and dropped his files and papers onto the desk. "Sorry I'm late, I was delayed in outpatients."

He didn't look at me at all but I felt my cheeks colouring a little anyway. He was late because he'd fucked me across his desk at lunchtime. On the pretext of collecting a book from him, which we had forgotten. Damn.

"Before we start presentations, I need to tell you all that I've been in touch with your course controller about your placements. I'm likely to be involved in industrial action in the near future, perhaps as soon as Monday. If I am, and the industrial action only involves one day of your placement, we'll continue on the same as usual after that day. If the industrial action continues for longer than that, you're to get in touch with your course controller and you'll be reassigned to somewhere without Bolshie doctors."

"Are you really going to strike?" Lin asked.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Dr. M shrugged. "Perhaps. We've got a stop work meeting at five. It'll go to a vote then. Now, who's first with today's presentations?"

No one offered, of course, and he pointed at me and said, "Blake? Let's hear about decubitus ulcers."

I talked until I was hopelessly over time with this but Dr. M didn't stop me, he let me finish.

I was exhausted by then. I could feel sweat trickling down my back, and I couldn't look at Andrew without remembering how we had been the night before. Fuck.

"How much of what actually happens here, on the wards, is evidence-based?" he asked the others. "Blake? Did you find that statistic during your adventures in Wonderland?"

I shook my head. Damn, I should have found that out.

"Medical mythology has it that ten to fifteen percent of what we actually do is evidence based, that is it is grounded in sound scientific process. You all probably want to write this down," Dr. M said. "And put it somewhere you can see it everyday."

There was silence while we scribbled, and Dr. M smiled at us all. "Actually, a mere fifty-one percent of all medical care flies in the face of science."

"Why do we do it, then?" Lin asked, face creased with dismay.

Dr. M crinkled his eyes at Lin. "Because we can't bear to leave the patient to suffer, so we try anything we can. Because we're talking about the human body, not a machine, and we don't actually understand how it works. Because the way to provide scientific proof for the treatment is too

hideous for an ethics committee to approve. Can any of you think of examples of treatment on this ward, right at this moment, where there is consensus it's the right thing to do and there's no scientific rationale for it?"

"Um," I said. "There's the man with the abscess on his leg that's growing pseudomonas. He's being treated with antibiotics that MCS said the bug was resistant to."

Dr. M nodded. "Five grams of amoxicillin a day. That's a toxic dose. There isn't any reason why it should help, but his WBC this morning has dropped. He'll eventually get better by himself, we're just giving him a bit of a hand to get started."

He checked his watch. "We're out of time. I'm off to a stop work meeting. Haven't been to one of these since I worked as a labourer. If you want to observe, you're welcome to come along, too."

Did I want to watch? Oh, yeah. It was another chance to watch Andrew being impassioned about something, and while it wasn't quite as personally rewarding as watching him being impassioned about me, it would still be good.

Chapter Twenty

The last meeting had been full of drama and threats, but this one was calm. The collective will of the staff was palpable from the moment when F stood up, piece of paper in his hand, and said that he had been sacked, effective immediately.

There really wasn't any need for any of the discussion after that, but we went through the process, making sure that the minutes included discussion of the ethical implications of our actions.

F looked subdued, and sober, and I could just about imagine how it was for him. I was an interloper, trained in the US, and I'd only been at the hospital for two years. F, on the other hand, had been there for ten years, apart from a sabbatical in Philadelphia for research. This was his home, for all its failings.

I'd prearranged with the BMA rep and the independent lawyer they'd brought in to the chair the meeting that I'd be the one to propose the motion that we take industrial action, and after three-quarters of an hour I put my hand up.

"Madame Chair, Dr. Maynard, Registrar. I'd like to propose the motion that in protest at the administration's disciplining and dismissal of Dr. Seagate that the medical staff withdraw their services from this hospital for eight hours on Monday the 23rd."

Big words, that were going to mark me forever as a troublemaker, at least in the UK medical system, and I didn't fucking care. They hired us to do a job, then fucked us over

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

when we did it. This wasn't enough, but it was a token of support for F, who was the best damn renal doctor I'd ever met.

The room was silent, but I could see F's face, and his eyes were wet. Damn, I felt the same way myself.

Clarissa Jax, who was a surgical resident and the BMA divisional rep, with a background in student politics, raised her hand. "Madame Chair, Dr. Jax, Resident. I second that motion."

"Dr. Maynard," the chair said. "Would you like to speak to the motion?"

I stood up and turned around to face the crowded room. "I would, Madame Chair." The room was completely full, packed with far more white coats and stethoscopes than I would ever have imagined. There was a hell of a lot of BMA membership cards pinned to pockets, too.

I spotted Matthew at the back of the room, with Lin and Nevins and the rest of the group. Word had obviously gone out on the med student grapevine because there were a lot of other short coats in the room.

"Dr. Seagate did what we all do every day; he attempted to circumvent the artificial restrictions the administration places on our practice. He was trying to get the speedy surgical review that his patient needed. It was no different in essence from all the times we talk to each other in the cafeteria or car park, bypassing the administration's channels. No different from buying roses for Gracie in outpatients to bump a patient up the waiting list, no different from a surgical

registrar re-diagnosing a patient to change their place on the waiting list.

"He received a formal letter of discipline from the Director of Medical Services, and took the matter to the BMA for consultation. It was this act, that of consulting with a union lawyer at a meeting in this room, that led to his dismissal. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Britain is signatory, Article 23, clause 4, states that 'Every person has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his or her interests.'"

I paused, gave them time to think about it, then said, "That is why we should take industrial action. This administration has dismissed one of us for doing exactly what we are doing now, organizing."

I sat down and pushed my hands between my knees to stop them from shaking. The room was silent, and my ears were ringing. The Chair said, "Dr. Jax, do you wish to speak to the motion?"

Clarissa stood and said, "Not at the moment, thank you."

"Does anyone wish to speak against the motion?" the chair asked, and then it was on. Abrogation of duty of care. Hippocratic oath. Socialised healthcare. I didn't speak again; I didn't need to.

After fifteen minutes, when I could no longer bear it, I raised my hand, and the chair halted the lawyer and said, "Dr. Maynard, do you wish to withdraw your motion?"

"No, Madame Chair," I said. "I wish to move the motion that the first motion be put to the vote without further debate."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

There was a chorus of seconders, and the chair said, "I will now put the motion that..." She glanced down at her notes. "...that in protest at the administration's disciplining and dismissal of Dr. Seagate that the medical staff withdraw their services from this hospital for eight hours on Monday the 23rd. Those in favour say 'Aye'."

There was a resounding chorus of 'Ayes.'

"Those against, say 'No'."

It certainly wasn't unanimous.

One of the administration's lackeys stood up and said, "Madame Chair, I request a secret ballot."

"A reasonable request in the absence of a clear majority," the chair said.

There was a five minute recess while the ballot was counted, and I checked my watch. It was after six. I was going to be late collecting Henry, but that was hardly anything new.

I would have liked to have gone and stood with Matthew while we waited for the count to be done, just for the chance to be close to him, but F was looking like shit now, so I let him lean against me.

The chair called the meeting back to order and we took our seats again. Whichever way the count went, it wasn't going to be good, and for a moment I doubted whether the staff had the collective will to carry this out, then someone behind me squeezed my shoulder.

The chair said, "By a margin of twenty-seven votes, the motion is carried."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I should have stayed for the post-meeting discussions but I was exhausted all of a sudden. I just wanted to get out of there, pick Henry up, and be in my own home. It had been a long week, between work and Matthew, and I needed to just sit for a while.

Matthew was gone when I extricated myself from the crowd around F and got out of the room, and I was a little disappointed. I couldn't have kissed him, or even touched him, but it would have been good to just see him smile.

Chapter Twenty One

The Morris wasn't hard to spot, rusting away in the midst of the performance vehicles parked in the doctors' bays in the car park. I sat down on the bonnet, knowing from experience the car had no alarm, and found myself explaining exactly what I was doing to the officious security guard who came around and shone a torch in my face suspiciously.

I showed him my medical student ID card and he wrote down the details and left me there, obviously unhappy.

I wasn't quite sure what I was doing waiting for Andrew; for all I knew, he'd gone to the pub with Dr. Seagate. I just wanted to see him again. It wasn't cold, I could wait a little while, and if he didn't show up, I'd stick a note under the windscreen wiper and go home.

The security guard came around again, just as the fluorescent lighting in the car park flickered into life, and this time he didn't point his torch at me.

My stomach rumbled. I pulled out a pen, found a sheet of notepaper in my backpack, and was scrawling a note for Andrew when footsteps made me look up.

All of a sudden I realised exactly how this looked. He'd said he was spending the weekend with his son and he couldn't see me, and here I was, sitting on his car. Very stalkerish.

I put the pen and paper down as he walked up to me.

"Matthew?" Andrew said, and he smiled at me.

He looked exhausted, completely drained, and he leaned against the driver's door of the car, keys in his hand.

"Um, Andrew," I said. "I was just going to leave you a note..."

His dropped his keys in a pocket, his hand settled over mine as I went to screw the paper up and he took the paper out of my hand gently. He didn't read it, just folded the paper up carefully and put it in his pocket, then reached out and brushed my hair off my forehead.

"I'm glad you waited," he said.

His fingers were touching my cheekbone now, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips against mine.

I thought I knew about kissing. Kissing was what you did to someone's mouth to show them what you wanted to do to the rest of their body. You could kiss in public, and it wasn't necessarily obscene, and as long as you weren't too worried about being gay-bashed, it was acceptable behaviour.

Andrew's lips slid across mine and his mouth opened and his fingers eased across my scalp, but this was different. He didn't pull my body against his, he didn't do that ... thing he did with his tongue. This was slow and gentle and I melted completely under his mouth ... his touch.

There were footsteps but he didn't break the kiss, just kept moulding his lips gently against mine, his breath tickling across my face, his hand warm, cradling my scalp.

My chest felt tight, my hands tingled where they gripped his shoulders, and I moaned against his mouth and slid off the car bonnet and into his arms.

The tingling had slid up my arms now, and I pushed the fingers of one hand up into Andrew's hair as a car drove past, its headlights bright red through my eyelids for a moment.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Andrew was moaning; I could feel it rumbling through us both, and I clung to him, sliding my hand under his white coat just to feel his body heat.

A car started nearby, the distant roar of a motorbike echoed through the car park, and I was lost. We could stay there forever, kissing, and I would be happy. This wasn't about sex, even though we were both hard; this was about touching and breathing, and the feel of Andrew's mouth on my neck, and I was hopelessly lost...

Andrew's phone rang, and he extricated himself from my arms to answer it, keeping one arm around me still. "That's Henry's ring tone," he said, lifting the phone to his ear. "Hey, kiddo. No, I haven't left the hospital yet ... The stop work meeting went well, yeah, we're on strike on Monday."

I could hear Henry's voice, tinny through the phone, and Andrew chuckled. "No, you don't need to donate your graphic novels to the strike fund, you maniac ... We'll grab some food on the way to my place. I'm just about to leave now, though I think I have to drop a friend home first ... Say, thirty-five minutes."

He smiled at me and said, "Love you, too," to the phone.

The fluorescent tube overhead flickered one last time and died. Andrew's eyes were on my face, lingering on my lips. "I'm going to miss you tonight," he whispered. "I want to hold you all night, just to feel you against me."

The security guard walked past again, with his damn torch, and had the good grace to just keep walking and ignore us in the shadows.

"You need to go," I said as my hand stroked the back of his neck.

He nodded and stepped back and when his attention was on the lock, I hung onto the car quickly to stop my knees from giving way.

He leaned across the car and undid the passenger door, and I found the presence of mind to walk around the car and clamber in.

We didn't say anything in the car; he just flicked the radio on and Radio 3 played quietly. He pulled up outside my place, and the lights were on and the door stood open, but there was no music booming. Maybe everyone had gone out.

I went to open the door, and Andrew caught my hand in his. "Sunday night?" he said. "I'll be taking Henry home Sunday evening. I could pick you up afterwards."

I leaned across the car and pressed my lips against his. "Please," I said, then I got out of the car before anything unfortunate, like begging, happened.

Andrew drove off, and I skirted the pile of bulging black garbage bags on the steps and walked into someone else's home.

The front hall had been cleared of debris and swept, the lounge room was neat and tidy, there was no bong on the coffee table; even Clive's mattress looked neat. A middle-aged woman in jeans and T-shirt appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Hello," she said. "I'm Angie, Heidi's mum. Who are you?"

Ah, now the whole tidiness thing made sense. We'd been combat-mothered.

"I'm Matthew," I said. "How's Heidi going? I didn't get a chance to see her today."

Angie had hair the same dark blonde colour as Heidi's, or at least the same colour as Heidi's would be if she washed it. A broad smile spread across her face. "Matthew!" she said. "You must be the lovely medical student who lives here, who saved Heidi." She was across the room and hugging me in an instant.

I hugged her back briefly. "It was Andrew who did it, not me," I said.

She let go of me and smiled knowledgeably. "He's your boyfriend, right?"

"Um, I guess so."

She took hold of my elbow and led me into the kitchen. "I made a casserole and a nice pudding. Come and have something to eat, you must be starving."

There was food, real food, with meat in it, and water-soluble vitamins and fibre and stuff. I hadn't eaten so well since I'd last been at home at Christmas. Angie sat across the table from me, poured extra cream on my crumble, and said, "Tell me about your boyfriend."

I felt myself colouring. After the way he'd kissed me in the car park, I wasn't sure I could talk coherently about him, but I was willing to try.

Chapter Twenty Two

Henry stared at my office.

"Um, Dad," he said. "If my bedroom looked like this, Mom would kill me." He wrinkled his nose. "It smells funny in here."

I pushed enough of the runaway paperwork aside to get the door open fully, then forced the window open. It did smell funny, and I knew exactly why. "Yep. And if I don't clear this up, someone will come along and kill me, too." I pushed the power button on my work PC and it lurched into life, then took the rubbish bin out to the janitor's room to empty it. "Give me a moment to log you in, then you can cruise around online. Just, please, try not to set off the net nanny," I said when I came back.

"K, Dad," Henry said, and he stepped over the mess and clambered into my office chair. "Can I print stuff out?" he asked.

"Sure." I leaned over him to type in my password. Once he was in and typing in a url, I turned my attention to the paperbomb that had gone off in my office.

Henry was safely occupied, going through every site that might have cheats for his favourite game, and I began to sort and stack the papers. There were coffee stains on some, from yesterday, but nothing important seemed to have been ruined. I really needed to sort this whole disaster out, because if I was fired on Monday, someone would have to deal with this, and I couldn't just drop this on whoever replaced me.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

It took a long time, long enough that Henry made two raids on the snack machine in the main hall, but eventually I had seven neat piles of papers on the floor, twelve coffee cups on the desk, and I'd completely filled the recycling bin that I'd dragged to my office door.

I filed the seven piles, ignoring the issue of cleaning out my filing system, washed the coffee cups up myself rather than leaving them for a janitor, and emptied my office rubbish bin again.

It was done; they could fire me now.

Henry looked up when I came back into the office carrying the rubbish bin and said, "You're a slob, aren't you, Dad?"

I sat down on my plastic chair. "So I've been told, though I've seen much worse," I said, thinking of Matthew's house. "You finished? Want to follow me around on a quick round? I'll stop any of the nurses from hugging you, I promise."

"Sure, Dad, but you have to tell me what all the machines do, even the gross ones."

Heidi was sitting up in bed when I found her room, and a woman who could only be her mother was brushing her hair. They both looked up as Henry and I walked in. Heidi beamed at me and said, "Mum, this is Andrew."

I smiled at Heidi and then turned to her mother. "Hi, I'm Dr. Andrew Maynard, and this is my son, Henry. I just dropped in to see how Heidi was going."

Heidi held up her splinted arm, showing an impressive set of sutures, and Henry said, "Wow, can I see them?"

Heidi held out her arm proudly. "Thirty-six stitches on the outside, sixty-five on the inside." Henry's eyes grew wide and

he leaned over to peer at the sutures. Next to chest tubes, he liked sutures best, and while I kept him well supplied with chest tubes, having shown him two already today, sutures were not something I had much to do with.

Heidi's mom said, "I'm Angie. Thank you so much for what you did for Heidi. I met your nice boyfriend last night, made him a real dinner."

Oh, fuck.

Henry almost fell off Heidi's bed in his astonishment, so I hauled him back onto his feet. "Must rush, I'm needed on the ward. Glad Heidi's better." Henry towed me out into the corridor.

"Boyfriend!" he said. "You've got a boyfriend? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Ahh, good question," I said. "Sorry, kiddo, I was planning on telling you. We only just got together."

Henry looked disapproving. "You're supposed to tell me these things, you know. Go on, I want details."

"Not here," I said, mindful of the nurses hovering around, including F's bedwarmer, Lena.

She smiled knowingly at me as I strode out of the ward, Henry almost running to keep up with me.

I made Henry wait until we got into the car. "Well?" he demanded as I started the car. "What's he like? Why didn't you tell me? Is he another doctor?"

"He's a medical student, one of my latest batch. His name's Matthew. There, satisfied?"

"No way," Henry said. I leaned out of the window and swiped my staff card through the exit gate at the car park. "I wanna know all about him. When am I going to meet him?"

"Not this weekend," I said firmly. "Give me a chance here."

Henry subsided into quiet glee in the front passenger seat. I had no idea he'd be so pleased I was seeing someone. He'd hated my last boyfriend, so I'd kind of assumed that his malevolence would carry on to Matthew, but it hadn't. Maybe he'd worked out I was lonely? I never knew what was going on in Henry's head.

He bounced on to my bed that night, unbearably cute in his striped pajamas, suddenly young again. I looked up from the document I was scanning, highlighter pen in my mouth.

"He Hinny," I said, then I took the pen out of my mouth and said, "Hey, Henry."

"Dad?" Henry said. "Do you love Matthew? Because if you do, and you want him to stay here on the weekends, you could just close the bedroom door, and I wouldn't walk in or anything."

I smiled at him. "That's very generous of you," I said, touched more than I expected.

Henry bounced again, sitting cross-legged, and said, "Well?"

I shook my head. "Give up, kiddo. I'm not going to talk to you about how I do or don't feel about Matthew, not without talking to him first. For all I know, he's going to run screaming from this obnoxious pre-pubescent child of mine."

Henry chortled happily, obviously drawing conclusions of his own, and he flopped down beside me on the quilt. "I

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

spotted his toothbrush and razor," Henry said. "I must have been an idiot not to see them last night." He wriggled a bit, digging into me with both a knee and an elbow at once. "You know, if he's a med student, he's probably not much older than me, is he?"

We both burst out laughing. "Go to bed, you little horror," I said.

"Good night, Dad," he said, and he scrambled into my lap for a quick hug, crumpling all my papers.

"Good night, Henry," I said, kissing his forehead.

He clambered off the bed and scooted out of the room. I picked up my papers, leaned back against the bed head, and closed my eyes.

I wasn't sure how I felt. The rational bit of me was saying that I couldn't possibly, after only a week, actually know Matthew well enough to be in love with him. But, if I turned that bit of my head off, I couldn't think of him without a smile creeping across my face. Then there was that piece of foolscap paper, carefully stored in my wallet. It didn't say much, just, 'Dear Andrew, You spoke wonderfully, I was nearly in tears'. The writing trailed off part way through the next word, but it was enough that Matthew had actually tried to find me.

Then there was the way he'd kissed me.

If I wasn't in love, it was a damn good facsimile of it.

Chapter Twenty Three

It was my usual weekend routine. I'd wake early, study for a good solid eight hours, when the house was at its quietest, then go down the pub mid-afternoon. I'd sink a few lagers, hopefully at someone else's expense, and head back to the house to hit the books again.

It sounded pretty awful if I described it to anyone, but it worked. I could keep my marks up this way, and get enough sleep, too.

What I hadn't expected was to find someone else sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and a paper when I went downstairs at six on Sunday morning, tea bag in my hand.

"Hi, Angie," I said sleepily, putting the kettle on and leaning against the pantry. I could see through the laundry to the little store room that was where Heidi and Tim slept. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen Tim for a few days. "Did you sleep in Heidi's room?" I asked Angie.

She nodded. "I can't afford a room anywhere, so it seemed the obvious thing to do. Guess Heidi had neglected to mention she lived with her boyfriend, so it wasn't until I found all his stuff that I realised I'd kicked him out of the bed."

The kettle boiled, and I took a clean mug ... There were clean mugs! And plates when I opened the cupboards. In fact, the sink was empty. "Oh, wow, you washed up," I said as I poured water onto the tea bag.

"Doesn't anyone usually do it?" Angie asked.

"No, we all wash up what we need for ourselves each time," I said. "I've got used to it. I can remember early in the

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

year, we had some sort of roster, but it rapidly became anarchy. I keep all my food in my room. You found Heidi's food?"

Angie nodded. "Took me a little while to work out why she had cans of baked beans in her room, and a jar of coffee." She smiled knowingly. "Andrew came around yesterday while I was at the hospital. He's really rather gorgeous," she said. "He had his son with him, too."

I sat down at the kitchen table with my tea. "You met Henry?" I said. "What's he like?"

She pursed her lips for a moment. "Spoilt would be my guess. His dad obviously adores him. You've not met him?"

I shook my head. "I've only seen photos of him."

"Gruesome little child," Angie said. "Just like my eldest. He was obsessed with plane crashes."

"I had a thing about bones," I admitted. "I had shoeboxes of them, scrounged off Tile Hill, in the woods. I always hoped I'd find human remains one day. I found a dead cat once and cleaned it up and reassembled the skeleton with glue."

Angie stared at me, and I smiled in a way that I hoped was disarming, but probably just made me look like a serial killer in training.

"Think I'll get started on my revision," I said, standing up again.

* * * *

I didn't hit the pub that afternoon. I had no money, and had no inclination to charm strangers until they bought me beer. It wasn't that all I could think of was Andrew, because

that wasn't true. I was managing to think about metabolic pathways, complement cascades, classical disease presentations, and neurological anatomy quite well, but when I took my five minutes per hour break my head was full of him.

Angie brought me a plate of sandwiches at one stage, and the household remained blissfully quiet. I liked this; it made it much easier to study. Perhaps it was time to move out, borrow some more money. It was only a few months until I started earning and getting through my finals would be easier if I lived somewhere quiet.

I lay back on the mattress, Kelley open on my chest. I couldn't help it; I couldn't stop myself from imagining living with Andrew, in his comfortable house, in his comfortable bed. I'd never lived with anyone before, I'd never wanted to, but it would be wonderful to sleep next to Andrew every night.

Reality dumped a bucket of cold water over my fantasies. Andrew had a son whom he obviously adored; I couldn't just move in on him, no matter how annoying my housemates were.

I was practicing my physical assessment techniques on Angie when Andrew arrived. She was proving to be far more obliging than any of my housemates had been, letting me run through the procedure over and over again, trying to get my time under thirty minutes.

Andrew was leaning against the doorframe, and he waited while I went through the process of checking Angie's pedal pulses to finish up her circulatory system.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He knelt down beside me and took my index cards out of my hands and tossed them over his shoulder. "Start again," he said. "This time, instead of doing it in anatomical systems, start at the top and work down."

"But..." I said, and he smiled at me and I couldn't help but smile back at him.

I did what he said, checking Angie's eyes, retinas, ear and teeth. Palpebral conjunctivas were pink. I did the neuro stuff, looking at nystagmus, pupil dilation and tracking, then moved down. Larynx wasn't deviated, no lymph glands in her neck were palpable. Chest next: palpate, chest expansion was symmetrical, percuss, auscultate. Then her heart: aortic valve, pulmonic valve, Erb's point, tricuspid, and mitral.

No Murphy's punch for the kidneys. I remembered Andrew warning us he'd fail any medical student who used so barbaric a method of assessment. If we couldn't pick a kidney infection by general assessment, apparently we shouldn't be practicing medicine.

Lymph nodes under her arms. Angie lay down on the couch and I checked for her aorta pulse, listened for gut sounds, percussed, locating liver margins. No masses in her stomach.

Hands: pulses, sensation, strength, reflexes.

Lower limbs: pulses, reflexes, strength, sensation.

Andrew was smiling encouragingly at me when I looked up as I helped Angie to her feet. Balance, proprioception, gait.

I was done in twenty-nine minutes.

Angie seemed as excited as I was, bouncing up and down and hugging me, then she disappeared into the kitchen and I

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

wrapped my arms around Andrew's neck and kissed him quickly. "Have you eaten?" he asked me quietly.

"We've had dinner cooked for us," I said.

Angie carried a cardboard box into the lounge room.

"Curry," she said. "I've cooked rice, too, so you'll just need to reheat it. And there's a nice pudding in there, too."

Andrew looked flabbergasted, and I could understand the feeling. I handed him the box and left him thanking Angie for her cooking while I ran up the stairs to grab my backpack, laptop and textbooks.

Chapter Twenty Four

The smell of curry filled the car, and it was a smell I would forever associate with England. Until I'd found 'Dulang Thai' the only takeaway food I'd been able to stomach had been Indian. I couldn't believe that any one would actually eat a deep fried Mars bar. Henry had force-fed me Red Dwarf at about the same time, and Dave Lister was right; curry and lager were meant for each other. Mind you, the curries were distinctly English, too, swimming in grease, served with too much dhal, and sultanas, of all things.

"Are you starving?" I asked Matthew. "Do you need to go ahead and eat the curry now, hopefully without spilling it over my car?"

Matthew laughed. "I'm not starving. I was brought a plate of roast beef and mustard sandwiches at four this afternoon." He leaned forward in the car and fiddled with the radio, presumably trying to tune it to something other than Radio 3, just like Henry. "Did you have a good weekend?" he asked, sitting back up, having found Radio 1.

"Yeah," I said. "I sorted my office out yesterday, and Henry ate all my gummi bears. Went to the movies last night, and Henry and I spent this afternoon wandering around the city some more. We start out, head somewhere that sounds exciting, and see what happens. We spent today in Whitechapel, looking at the Jack the Ripper sites. What about you?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Study," Matthew said. "House was blissfully quiet because Angie kept grumping about the noise, so everyone went elsewhere to party."

We stopped at some traffic lights, and I spread my hand over Matthew's thigh. It had been a long time since I'd felt like this.

Matthew was quiet while we ate dinner on the couch and he looked tired. I put my empty plate down on the coffee table and took his out of his hands. "If you just want to go to sleep, that's okay," I said.

He slid across the couch into my arms. "Not that tired," he said. When I kissed him, he tasted of masala and rice and lager. "I do need a shower first, though."

In the shower, I carefully washed both of his nipple piercings, sliding the bars through the flesh, twisting them gently, cleaning the bars and balls, then sucking the metal and flesh into my mouth.

I was in that space again, the place where everything slid away inside my head. Matthew's eyes were half-closed when I kissed him again. His breathing was slow and deep; he was there, too. F took drugs, my ex and her muso friends got there through live performance, and I could possibly, if I tried, remember enough functional neuro anatomy to describe it, but not while it was happening.

I knelt down, and the tiles were hard under my knees. I slid the bar though Matthew's cock backward and forward, rotating it, cleaning around the beads with a wash cloth, and his cock throbbed in my hand. I washed him carefully, the

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

water pouring down my shoulders, running in rivulets down Matthew's thighs.

He sighed, audible over the sound of the shower, and he leaned back and spread his legs wider. I washed his balls and his ass, then he guided his cock into my mouth. I nearly came at that moment, just from the taste of his skin.

The beads were hard in my mouth, and Matthew didn't push in any further. I curled my tongue around the bottom bead and rolled it around.

The room was suddenly silent when Matthew turned the shower taps off and I opened my eyes now the water was no longer streaming down my face. He was looking down at me, awe in his eyes. I couldn't take any more of him into my mouth; the beads were even more in the way than when he had a condom on, banging against my palate, clinking against my teeth as I twisted my head, looking for a better angle. My fingers curled around the base of his cock, steadying it, and Matthew spread his hands across the tiles, fingers splayed.

His ribcage was rising and falling visibly, his breath echoing. I began to suck, sliding the bar up and down with my tongue, and when I peered up at Matthew again, he had his eyes closed and his mouth open. I stroked slowly with my hand, coaxing him on, and I could taste him. He was leaking now, bitter and strong, breathing hard, moaning under his breath...

I was unbearably hard, and it was a blessed relief to touch my own cock with my other hand, not to stroke, just to squeeze the head, then the shaft.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Matthew's fingers were curled around my skull now, temporal, occipital. His hand moved forward, zygomatic arch, maxilla, mandible, and I gripped his iliac crest with my free hand to steady him.

He was close, I could feel him trembling on the edge of orgasm, then he cried out, this inarticulate sound that made me ache even more, and his cock throbbed, and he began to come.

I swallowed as much as I could. Matthew's knees buckled, and I steadied him with my hand, then let him slide down the shower wall into my arms, onto the tiled floor.

I just held him for a little while, both of us breathing hard, then I kissed him and he wrapped his arms around my neck.

We couldn't sit there for long; the heating in the bathroom wasn't good enough, and the tiles and grouting were just plain uncomfortable, but I let Matthew recover for a while.

"Fuck," he whispered. "That was amazing."

I pushed the wet hair off his face and looked at him closely. He looked so vulnerable, the tiredness gone from his eyes now, and something occurred to me.

"That was the first time, wasn't it?" I murmured against the wet skin of his shoulder. We were cold now; Matthew was almost shivering.

"First time without a condom, yeah," he said.

I have to admit the smile I hid against his neck was smug.

He slapped my thigh gently and said, "Stop that," and I could hear the laughter in his voice clearly.

"You're cold," I said. "Come and get warm and I'll make you a hot chocolate."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He pulled himself to his feet with the hand rail. "I don't like cocoa," he said, reaching for a towel.

"Ah, I didn't say cocoa," I said, wrapping a bathrobe around myself and watching his eyes widen when he realised there was a second robe hanging behind the door, waiting for him. "I said hot chocolate."

Chapter Twenty Five

The bathrobe was thick and fluffy and deep red, and I adored it. I sat on the couch, my hair still dripping, pulled my legs up, and sighed contentedly. The gas heater was on, blasting heat into the room, and Andrew was doing arcane things in the kitchen.

There was a shelf of DVDs on the bookcase and it only took a few moments to work out that, unless Andrew was obsessed by cheesy action flicks, the DVDs were all there for Henry. When Andrew put a mug in front of me on the coffee table, I said, "Where's your porn? I've not seen any here."

"No porn," Andrew said, sitting beside with his mug. "Porn is incompatible with Henry, who is unbelievably nosy. As are all other vices, such as bondage gear and secret stashes of chocolate."

"No porn?" I said, shaking my head. "But what do you do?"

I sipped my mug, and looked at Andrew in surprise. It tasted incredible, not all watery and bitter like cocoa.

"There're cream and marshmallows and melted chocolate in that," Andrew said smugly. "And I have to rely on my fevered imagination. That, and being so tired that jerking off is the last thing on my mind."

"Know all about that one," I said, scooping some of the cream floating on top of the chocolate up with my finger and eating it. "God, this is good."

Andrew caught hold of my hand, lifted it to his mouth and sucked on my finger, too. "Mmm," he said. "I agree." He

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

licked my palm, nipped the tip of my thumb with his teeth, then sucked on the sensitive skin of my wrist.

I groaned, this strange gurgling sound, and he chuckled. "You're an evil bastard, aren't you?" I said.

"Me? Never." He nipped the skin, making me squirm. His hand slid up my thigh, parting my robe and exposing my rapidly thickening cock.

"Put your mug down," he said, and his hand slid down my calf and wrapped around my ankle.

As soon my mug was safely on the coffee table, he lifted my foot up and pressed his mouth against the instep of my foot.

I squirmed, and I have to admit it, I giggled. Giggling was so adolescent. "Stop it," I said, trying to pull my foot away. "I'm ticklish, you bastard."

His hands were tight around my ankle, holding my foot still, and he stopped kissing it for long enough to say, "Being ticklish is about being afraid of being touched. Just relax and let me show you."

I stopped struggling, and he said, "That's better. Now, close your eyes and just feel what I'm doing; don't try and think about it."

I was dubious, and it must have shown on my face, because Andrew said, "Trust me, I'm a doctor."

The hand around my ankle was firm and he rubbed his fingertips in tiny circles. "All right," I said, and I closed my eyes and just let myself feel what he was doing.

I'd always been ticklish, so it was hard work to stop myself from pulling away, and Andrew's mouth, even though he was

just kissing and licking, felt sharp and discordant. "That's better," he murmured, and he was right.

If I didn't fight him, it felt intense and strangely erotic, especially when he bit gently. "Oh!" I said, and tingles began to run up and down my legs. This was incredibly intimate. Andrew sucked on my toes and then picked up my other foot and guided it into his crotch so it pressed against his cock.

He was a kinky bastard.

Who was onto something.

I wriggled the foot in his lap, working it inside the folds of his robe, and he chuckled, sending vibrations down my leg. His tongue was slithering between my toes now, rubbing across the webs of flesh, and I was breathing hard, stretched out on the couch, basking in the warmth from the gas heater.

Andrew's cock was hard and I rubbed the arch of my foot up against it, pressing it against his belly and said, "Pervert."

Andrew took my big toe out of his mouth. His breath was cool across the wet flesh when he said, "That's a bit rough coming from a man with a bar through his cock."

I propped myself up on my elbows and opened my eyes. "You like what I can do with the bar through my cock."

He put my foot down and leaned forward and ran his tongue up the length of my cock, making me gasp.

"I do like it a lot," he said against my belly. "Shall we go upstairs, where there are condoms and lube, and establish this as a certainty?"

I loved him for letting me know that even though we'd just had unprotected oral, he wasn't expecting to have unsafe penetrative sex.

Oh, God, I loved him.

This wasn't just infatuation or sexual obsession, this was the real thing.

My chest was tight as I followed Andrew up the stairs, and I felt suspiciously like I wanted to cry. This was scary. I was out of my depth here, and I was suddenly nervous. Andrew must have sensed this, because he paused on the top stair and said, "You okay?"

"Yeah."

He closed the bedroom door and touched my cheek gently with the palm of his hand. "Shh," he whispered, kissing my lips lightly. He kept kissing me like that, gentle kisses, coaxing my mouth open, teasing me with his tongue, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him back, like we had in the car park.

He undid my robe, sliding hands across my belly and around my back to cup my arse briefly

I moaned and pulled at his robe, needing to touch him, too, needing to feel his skin, to make him moan. I needed to fuck him.

Stepping back, I dropped the robe onto the floor and walked over to the bedside table. I took out a condom, lube, and gloves and dropped them on the bed. I pulled the gloves on and the latex snapped against my wrist. I was going to give Andrew exactly what he wanted.

He was on the bed, facedown, his eyes closed, tremulous expectation evident in every breath he took. I knelt down on the bed, traced one latex-clad finger around his ear, across

his cheek, then slipped it into his mouth. "Roll over," I whispered against his ear. "I want to see you."

I'd been nervous before, but it had slipped away in the familiarity of what we were doing. This was known; I knew what Andrew wanted, and it was what I wanted, too.

He rolled over and I squeezed lube into one hand, his eyes locked on it as I lay down beside him. I kissed him deeply and wrapped my hand around his cock, the lube slippery and cool, and began to stroke him slowly.

He whimpered against my mouth, and I remembered that I was the only one who had come in the shower. "Do you need to come now?" I asked him, lips pressed against his ear as I whispered. "Or can you wait for me?"

"I want to wait," he said. "Please."

A submissive with manners; always a good thing. I kissed his lips briefly. "All right." I let go of his cock and knelt up again.

I hadn't touched his arse since Thursday night, so he should have recovered completely, but I was as gentle as I could be, just in case. He didn't flinch or give me any sign he was sore as I slid one finger around the outside of his arse, getting him ready, giving him the chance to anticipate.

He was pliant, spreading his legs wide, lifting his hips a little, whispering, "Please" over and over. I slid two fingers slowly into him, knowing now that he could take two straight away, eased them all of the way in and bent forward and took his cock into my mouth.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

His body jerked—I felt it clearly—and he moaned. He tasted of soap and skin and lube, and I fucked him slowly with two fingers.

He wouldn't be able to take much of that, especially without a condom on to dull the sensation, so I lifted my mouth off him regretfully. Another time, next time, I'd make sure he came in my mouth.

He wanted more, more fingers, all of my hand probably, but neither of us were going to last long enough for that, so I slipped my fingers out of him and went to roll a condom on myself.

He stopped me, took the condom out of my hand and tore it open, then knelt in front of me. He licked the head of my cock, just the once, then carefully rolled the condom on me, over the underside bead first, then the one on the top of the glans. He'd been watching me.

He rolled the condom securely around the base of my cock, took the lube from me and coated my cock quickly, then tossed the tube of lube off the bed.

There was so much surrender in his eyes when he lay back down on the bed that it took my breath away for a moment.

I pushed gently into him and he was open and ready, the head of my cock sliding in smoothly. I held still for a moment, kissing him to distract him from any stinging, then slid halfway in. I paused, rolled my hips smoothly, watching his wide-open blue eyes for the flash.

There! That was just right and I kept the rolling motion going, dragging the top bead backward and forward inside him. It took finesse, and it took control, but I was willing to

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

wait to fuck him if it meant I got to watch his face while he lost his mind.

He was utterly beautiful, his mouth open, his eyes closed now, breathing hard. "More," he groaned. "Oh, fuck, more."

I gave him more, pushing in hard all the way, then pulling back, making sure I dragged the bead inside him, then slamming myself back in. We were both groaning with every thrust, and I dug my knees and elbows into the bed for further traction and picked up speed.

He was shouting, we both were, it felt so fucking good, and the bed thudded against the wall repeatedly, half a beat behind my thrusts. I wondered briefly what the harmonic frequency of Ikea furniture was, then he clutched at me with both hands, digging his nails into my back, and I felt come spreading hot and slippery between our bodies. I held still, hopefully with the bead in the right place, just to give him something to come around.

He collapsed back onto the bed and I began to fuck him slowly and gently, stretching each stroke out, sliding in all the way, following the rhythm inside my head. The pulse in Andrew's neck was bounding when he turned his head to one side, his eyes half-closed.

I kissed his pulse, then his cheek, resting my head, my whole body, down on him. He wrapped his arms around me, hugged me, and kissed my lips. I groaned and drove into him as hard as I could, my entire body shaking and trembling as my orgasm uncurled inside me as I thrust into him over and over.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Staying conscious afterwards didn't seem to be an option. I was distantly aware of Andrew getting rid of the condom and dragging a quilt over me, but I couldn't move enough to even go and brush my teeth. I'd have to apologise for my early morning breath tomorrow.

I woke once during the night and found I was curled up against Andrew's back, one arm slung over him. I didn't feel nervous anymore.

Chapter Twenty Six

The alarm woke Matthew briefly, just enough for him to peer at the clock and groan, "Why?"

I kissed him. "I have to do rounds before I go on strike." I tucked the quilt around his shoulders. "Go back to sleep."

It was three, not really morning at all, but I went through the motions, in the hope my brain would eventually catch up with my body and start working. Preferably before I got to the hospital and had to make any decisions.

I showered quickly, dressed in the clothes I'd left ready, and went downstairs to a beautifully warm house. Guess we'd left the heater on all night.

I turned it off, and put the coffee percolator on. There was leftover curry, which reheated very nicely in the microwave. I wasn't sure that curry was a good option for breakfast, but this counted as a late night snack anyway.

I left my spare house key on the kitchen bench, along with a note and the alarm system code.

* * * *

Rhonda yawned tiredly and looked at me in confusion when I poked my head around the staff room door.

"Dr. Maynard?" she said, sounding surprised. "Um, I haven't paged you or anything. I paged the night reg about Mrs. Silva, but I thought it was Ghastly George this week."

"It may well be Ghastly George; I just came in early to do rounds. Want to walk around the ward with me?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Rhonda nodded, put her shoes back on, and we started out on rounds. Ghastly George was a plump, vivacious young woman, competent and cheerful, and no one was quite sure how she got her name, but it had stuck so firmly to her that even the patients called her that. I hadn't known she was on nights; it was a subject I tried my hardest to remain oblivious to, just in case it happened to me.

"What's wrong with Mrs. Silva?" I asked Rhonda, hand on the door of her room. "I mean, that wasn't wrong on Saturday when I saw."

"She's Cheynes-Stoking," Rhonda said. "That's why I called George."

I pushed open the door of Mrs. Silva's room, lit by the subdued lighting that the nurses used on the critically ill. Kira, the other night nurse, was sitting quietly in the corner of the room, and Mrs. Silva's brother was sitting beside the bed, holding his sister's hand. Mrs. Silva's breaths filled the room. Each one shuddered in and rasped out, and the pauses were erratic. Her brother was in tears.

I touched his shoulder and said, "Come outside and we'll talk."

While I led Mrs. Silva's brother to the staff room, which was the only private place on the ward, I searched my brain for his name. John, that was it.

We all sat around the stained table.

"She's dying, isn't she?" John said, his pale eyes weary.

I nodded. "She is."

"Is there nothing you can do for her?"

This was the tricky part.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"There are interventions we can use that might extend her life, but they may be painful for her. What do you think she would want us to do? Keep her alive if she was going to suffer? Or let her as gently as we can?" I asked him.

A surprising number of people, when offered this choice, could put their own need to hold onto their loved one aside and make the right decision, and I didn't doubt that John was one of them.

"She won't suffer, will she?" he asked. "When she dies?"

I patted his hand. "No. We'll make sure that she just slips away."

Rhonda was studiously avoiding my line of sight, and I understood why. We were about to do a tricky and illegal thing, and we had to do it in such a way that there was no possibility of either of us being charged with conspiracy to commit grievous bodily harm.

John went back to his sister's room, and sat beside her bed, and I stood outside the room, Mrs. Silva's medication chart in my hands. "I'm going to adjust her pain management," I told Rhonda.

Rhonda nodded. "Yes, doctor."

"Page me or ring me, if you need me." Argh, I was striking today. "Up until eight a.m.. After that, my pager and cell phone will be off, but I'll be down at the front entrance to the hospital. Make sure you let the day staff know they can come and get me any time. I'll cross the picket line if I'm needed."

"I'll put that in the handover, make sure they know." She very carefully didn't look at the medication order I'd just

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

written, and I was glad she knew the process well enough not to ask difficult questions.

She put the chart back in the holder, and we moved onto the next patient.

I'd made 'a mistake' while changing Mrs. Silva from morphine to pethidine, and hadn't ceased the morphine order. It wasn't euthanasia, not quite, since the combined doses still weren't fatal, but it was certainly over-prescribing, and it meant Mrs. Silva would slip away in a drug-induced fog very quickly.

We shuffled around the ward, waking the patients that I really needed to examine, leaving the others resting while I reviewed their notes. It took a while, and Rhonda had to keep darting off to answer bells since Kira needed to sit with Mrs. Silva.

I was leaving the ward when Ghastly George walked up to the nurses' station, and, as always, she made me smile. She was prone to luridly bright clothing, and tonight was no exception. She trailed a purple scarf over a lime green T-shirt, and was wearing black and silver harem pants and red sneakers

I loved someone who didn't take the hospital's dress code too seriously. 'Professional attire' this was not. I felt like a sell-out in my sedate pale blue shirt and grey trousers.

She smiled widely at me and said, "Hey, Andrew. You answering my pager for me tonight?"

I shook my head. "Nope, just doing rounds before the industrial action starts."

"Figured as much." She leaned against the nurses' station to take the weight off her feet a little. "Lucia is down on orthopedics doing rounds, too, and I ran into Cecelia in the lift." She smiled tiredly at me. "Do I need to look at the patient I was paged for? Did you check her out?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Mrs. Silva is Cheynes-Stoking. I altered her analgesia."

Ghostly George nodded. "Good."

She walked to the elevator with me, and rode down a couple of floors before disappearing into the unlit hallways and gentle snores of the wards.

It was six now and I needed coffee. The house physicians' common room was the only place in the main building that had coffee at this time of the morning, and I couldn't be bothered hiking through the corridors to my own office, so I punched the pass code into the lock, confident that it wouldn't have changed since the last time I'd used the room.

There were a couple of doctors asleep on the couches so I left the lights off and crossed the darkened room to the lit alcove containing the kettle and cups. There was no milk, of course, but I could drink black coffee.

Hell, right at that moment, if there was no water, I'd eat the spoonfuls of instant coffee I needed.

I was tired. While there were real advantages to having a young lover, it was seriously affecting my sleep. Then I thought of the bar through Matthew's cock, and what the beads could do. I could get by without sleep. I'd survived interning; I'd survive Matthew.

Chapter Twenty Seven

When I woke, it took a few moments to work out where I was.

Everything was wrong; there was sunlight streaming around the edges of the blind, the bed was too soft and too clean and it smelled deliciously of sex, not of sour, unwashed sheets.

Andrew's Ikea bed. Which had withstood our attempts to shake it to pieces.

I hugged the other pillow contentedly. Andrew had left hours ago. I vaguely remembered him getting up in the middle of the night.

It wasn't time to get up yet; there was no clinical today because of the strike. I'd arranged to meet Lin and Nevins, and a couple of the other students from the stop work meeting, at nine. For someone who woke up at five-thirty every morning, that was a late start.

I rolled out of bed and found my robe. It was even better than borrowing Andrew's. It might not smell of him, at least not yet, but he'd bought it for me.

There was cold coffee in the percolator downstairs so I ditched it and emptied the filter, then refilled the machine. There was a note for me on the counter top, and a key.

'Dear Matthew,' it said, and I sat down on one of the stools against the counter.

There were instructions for the security system, and the code. Then Andrew said, 'There will no doubt be some kind of post industrial action get-together, probably at F's place,

since he triggered the whole thing. Come with me? I can call you, then come and pick you up from wherever you are.

'Stay at my place for the day if you want, there's broadband upstairs in my study and plenty of food in the cupboards. You won't have to eat olives and pears for lunch. Unless you want to, of course. Andrew.'

I put the note carefully in my robe pocket, along with the key.

I'd never seen Andrew's study. Somehow, by the time we made it upstairs, we were pretty focused on the bedroom or the shower. When the coffee percolator had gurgled to a halt, I poured myself a cup, added milk and sugar, and carried the mug upstairs.

There were five doors off the hallway; the three I knew were Andrew's bedroom, the bathroom and the loo. The fourth door was to Henry's bedroom; I'd know that teenage boy pong anywhere from my own adolescence. There were clothes piled on the floor and the bed was unmade. Henry had plastered the walls with movie posters, Blade and Underworld, and a faded Rocky Horror poster that made me nostalgic for midnight screenings and outrageous costumes and interjections.

"A toast," I muttered to the empty room.

The last door was Andrew's study, and it looked exactly like his office at the hospital, awash with papers, littered with coffee cups, except he had an LCD screen on his PC. Oh, yeah, that was a nineteen inch screen.

I sat down at his desk and dragged a finger gently across the top of the screen, disturbing the dust. God, if I had a

nineteen inch LCD screen, it would be lovingly dusted every day and carefully cleaned with a fifty percent solution of isopropyl and water every week. "You'd get microfibre from me, baby," I said. "Nothing but the best."

The chair was pretty comfy, too, padded, with armrests. There were empty Coke cans nestled amongst the debris on the desk, and sweet wrappers, and it seemed that all this technology was wasted on a kid.

There were bills stuck up above the desk, too, and I couldn't help but see them. I guess I wasn't really intruding since Andrew had specifically told me I could use his study. He didn't owe anything on his credit cards; they were all in positive balances. I'd never imagined a life without debt. Presumably he owed money on the house, but it had never occurred to me that Andrew might actually earn enough to not be in debt like everyone else.

Not that I had a credit card, of course, but I owed my mum several hundred pounds, and my student loan debt was staggering. I'd be paying that one off for the rest of my working life.

There was a bookshelf behind me and I swiveled around to check it out. Underneath the piles of photocopied journal articles stuffed randomly onto the shelving there were textbooks. Microbiol, communicable diseases, cardiology, haematology, orthopedics. No ob-gyn and no paediatrics, though.

There were novels, too, hardback editions with sumptuous covers, from small press companies I'd never heard of. Books

of poetry, including a leather-bound Emily Dickenson. Thoreau. Walt Whitman.

The art was gorgeous. There were canvases on the wall, like the rest of the house. I'd never paid any attention to them even though I had harboured secret thoughts of being an artist myself once. The less than secret desire to have a real career that would challenge me and make me feel like my life was not a total waste, while earning me a good income, had won. I stood up, ran a finger over the canvas over the desk. Blue ridges of oil paint, an impasto explosion in aquamarine and cerulean and cobalt blue. When I peered at the painting I could see there was scrawl underneath the paint, random pieces of handwriting.

I took the note out of my robe and chose a bit of the canvas where the scrawl was the right way up and held the note up to it.

There was no signature on the canvas to confirm it, but I was sure that the handwriting was Andrew's. He must have made coarse papier-mâché out of his own handwritten material, coated a canvas in it, and painted over it.

There was a pattern to the paintings once I had gone carefully around the upper floor of the house, peering at the art. In all of them, the two blue canvases in the study, the green and yellow in the bedroom, and the smaller mixed palette paintings in the hallway, Andrew had painted over handwritten material.

The painting in the bedroom was the most intriguing. Nothing showed through the thick spread of forest and moss greens, but the yellow was translucent enough to make out

that the handwritten material was sheets of scribbled music, written on plain paper, not musical score.

I wasn't sure how to interpret this. He'd said his ex was a musician, a violinist. I couldn't read music at all, so couldn't tell whether it was music for a violin, or for a slide trombone for that matter. It wasn't torn up or shredded, unlike the painting in the study. The sheets were carefully laid out, lines of musical notes matching up, and I wondered why it was what Andrew chose to keep in his bedroom. Was it a secret message, a memento of a marriage? Or did he just like it?

There were no painting supplies of any kind in sight, no stacked canvases, no easel, no sketchpads, and I wondered why Andrew had stopped painting.

It made me kind of ashamed of my grotty room, too. There was nothing artistic in my room; the only thing I had that played music was my laptop; there wasn't a shred of creativity to be found there.

I had a couple of books on piercing, a pile of porn magazines, and not quite enough textbooks. The walls were covered in revision sheets, and the only reason the walls of the upstairs toilet weren't covered, too, was that Geoff number two had beaten me to it, and now we all crapped while staring at physics equations.

No poetry, no art, anyone would think that my degree had subsumed my life. Oh, yeah, that was right, it had.

I went back downstairs and heated up leftover curry for breakfast, and made myself curry sandwiches to take with me that day.

Chapter Twenty Eight

My pager woke me.

I fished it out of my pocket, blinked, and peered at the screen. Someone had turned the light on in the house physicians' common room and people were milling around, talking quietly so as not to disturb the people who were still asleep on the couches.

It was Clarissa, who'd seconded the motion to stop work at the meeting, and before I could get my cell phone out to call her back, she pushed the door to the common room open.

The cracked vinyl of the couch creaked as I sat up. She walked over and sat down beside me, inspecting my cup of cooling black coffee hopefully.

"Damn," she said. "I was hoping you had something decent there. I thought Americans were coffee aficionados."

"I'd like to be," I said, rubbing my face sleepily and then checking the temperature of my coffee, too. It wasn't stone cold, so I drank what was left. It was twenty to eight when I checked my watch, which explained why Clarissa had paged me. She was wearing scrubs and rubber clogs and smelled of the lingering stench of diathermy.

"Been working?" I asked.

She nodded. "Open reductions, two of them. Two theatres will be running through the day, there're enough surgeons and anesthesiologists working for that, but we started at five this morning to try and get through the night's Casualty intake."

She looked awful, nervous and close to tears, and I squeezed her hand reassuringly. "If you're needed, you can

always go back inside," I said. "Just make sure that the surgical coordinator knows to send someone to get you."

She blinked and nodded. "Have you done this before?" she asked. "Gone on strike?"

I shook my head. "Unless you count quitting a job flipping burgers at sixteen because the unnamed mega-corporation I worked for sacked someone for joining a union, no, I've never gone on strike."

"Oh," she said.

"Clarissa, we're doctors. The administration is telling us how to practice medicine, what we can and can't do for our patients. I worked in an Episcopalian community hospital in the US because I couldn't stand an HMO telling me what I could and couldn't do, and when I had to leave someone untreated. I didn't expect to come here and work in a socialised national health service, and have the hospital tell me the same things."

She hugged me quickly and I could feel how tense she was. "I'm going to go check my patients in post-op, I'll see you outside."

Ghastly George came over and took Clarissa's place beside me. She didn't say anything, just took hold of my hand and held it tightly. She was presumably off-duty, having been on the wards all night, and was also presumably working tonight, too, and I wondered if she was insane enough to join us on the picket line instead of sleeping.

We walked out just before eight, a solid elevator of doctors. Clarissa was crying beside me so I wrapped one arm

around her shoulders and Ghastly George kept hold of my other hand.

I hadn't thought what this moment might feel like, hadn't tried to imagine it, and I wished I had.

I was deeply moved. People slapped my back in the elevator, and when we stepped out into the main hallway through to the hospital's front entrance, orderlies and nurses and the women in striped aprons who worked in the candy store in the lobby all started clapping. There were doctors coming out of the main stairwell, too, and from the side hallway down to the orthopedics outpatient clinic and Casualty.

I could still hear Clarissa sobbing beside me, and I understood why.

We walked out the main entrance and onto the paved courtyard in front of the hospital, into blinding sunshine and the flash of cameras. Another thing I hadn't thought of.

There were doctors I didn't recognise standing outside, all wearing their BMA membership cards outside their pockets or clipped around their necks. They must have been the BMA stalwarts, the divisional reps and board members. There was a smattering of nurses uniforms' amidst the group of doctors that were massing in the courtyard, most wearing their RCN membership cards, presumably as a sign of support.

I handed Clarissa to Ghastly George and walked up to where a very forlorn F was standing with the BMA people. We hugged, and he said, "Really, this is all some terrible mistake. I don't actually mind being buggered by the admin and fired. Probably not enjoying it as much as you would, though."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I kissed him on the cheek. "We can't all have your good luck," I said. "Besides, what makes you think I'm a pillow biter?" Got to love the UK slang, so much more descriptive than 'fucking homo'.

He laughed, and sounded much more like the F I knew. "Honey," he said, hugging me again and chuckling against my ear. "Your darling med student has left knee prints on the back of your legs."

I'd miss him. I hugged him back.

"You're cheerful for someone that's unemployed," I said.

He slapped me on my back and grinned, and there was too much twinkle in his eyes. He was either tanked, or employed, and he didn't smell of booze.

"Smug bastard," I said. I left him to the tender ministrations of a BMA lawyer and walked through the milling crowd of doctors to where Jane was standing with a group of nurses.

She hugged me, nearly scaring the living daylights out of me.

"I had no idea you were joining us," I said. "No idea at all."

"Show of support, sweetheart," she said. "Thought I'd stand here with you until my shift starts. We all thought that. The RCN wouldn't approve any real industrial action, but there's no reason why we can't be here while we're off duty."

Somehow, the idea of Jane giving up her free time was even more amazing than her going on strike.

I kissed her cheek, and she went bright red and flapped her hands at me speechlessly.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Someone touched my elbow and pulled me aside, depriving me of the delight of seeing Jane with pink ears.

We stood quietly. It was more like a vigil than a strike. We had no placards, just the BMA banner fluttering in the gentle spring sunshine. No one shouted, or ranted. There wasn't a bullhorn in sight.

I couldn't bring myself to estimate how many doctors were there. Someone would count us, either from the BMA or the press, who were standing expectantly across the road, obviously hoping we'd behave like coal miners or dock workers, not very sad doctors.

People walked past, some of them staring at us, some of them avoiding our gaze as they walked through the hospital's main doors.

One little old woman with a stick and a plastic shopping bag walked past us into the hospital and came back a few minutes later and gave a cup of coffee to one of the gynae residents whose name I didn't know, before returning to the hospital. Hopefully she wasn't going to be requiring medical attention.

F nudged me with his elbow and said, "Quack."

Under the circumstances, it struck me as being extremely rude for him to be calling anyone here a quack, and my distaste must have shown because he said, "No, you idiot. Mamma Duck, here come your ducklings."

Chapter Twenty Nine

Lin walked ahead of me up to Andrew, hugged him quickly and said, "Hello, Dr. M. We've come to join you."

Andrew smiled at her, and he looked pleased. He hugged me in turn, and I had to remember not to kiss him, then he hugged Nevins and the girl with the Lancastrian accent

"Thank you for coming," he said. "It means a lot."

"Hi, Dr. Seagate," I said, and he slapped me heartily.

"Good to see you. I don't know any of your names, but you're all Dr. Maynard's students, aren't you?"

"Yes," Lin said. "He told us what happened to you, Dr. Seagate, and we went to the stop work meetings, too."

"Aren't you worried about the impact on your careers?" Andrew asked Lin.

She shook her head, sending black hair flicking around her shoulders. Damn, her hair was down, she must be going all out to impress Nevins.

"No, Dr. M.," she said. "I did some reading on the impact of the Irish strike of '87 on the careers of the participants, and it seemed to have not made a difference. Our career path is only influenced by the support of our clinical referees to a very small extent. Seventy percent of the human resource employment decision-making is based on the applicant's presentation at the first interview, with the rest primarily based on academic record. Clinical references do little other than prove that we worked in a particular hospital for a period of time. If we all just submitted blank letterhead samples from the hospitals, it would work just as well."

"Oh," Andrew said.

Lin looked around her. "Besides," she said. "I'm sure if we encounter any of these doctors in clinical placements, they won't hold our presence here against us."

"You researched this?" Andrew asked.

Lin nodded. "Definitely. I research everything."

As I found out when Nevins took me aside later on, scuffing his feet and looking embarrassed. "Blake," he said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I said. "What's up?"

"Do you know much about girls?" He was looking up at the hospital now, apparently fascinated by the grubby windows.

"Um, not really. I'm gay, Nevins, if you hadn't noticed. Why? What do you want to know?"

"I thought you might have, I dunno, been into girls before or something," he muttered.

Time to confess, before Nevins expired from embarrassment. "Yeah, I had a couple of girlfriends in high school."

He looked at me hopefully. "Did you have sex with them?"

"Sure, as often as I could persuade them to let me. Then I worked out guys were much more my style."

"I've been reading. You know, trying to, um, work things out, and it's nothing like the books say," he said, actually daring to look at me. I felt sorry for the poor bloke; Lin presumably had been researching their sex life, too.

I led him further away from the crowd. "What do you want to know?"

"How long does it take for a woman to, um, orgasm?" he whispered.

"Depends," I said. "One girl was on a hair trigger, just touch her and she went off. Another girl took hours, used to make my jaw ache every time. And we had to be somewhere completely private. I could never grab a quick shag in the loos with her. Does that help?"

He looked relieved and nodded. "And, um, was she very loud?" he asked, going pink again.

"Some people are loud, men as well as women, some are silent. Some you can hardly tell it's happened. Loud is good," I said cheerfully. "Means you're doing all the right things. You are using contraception, aren't you?" I said, partly just from the sadistic pleasure of making Nevins colour even more.

He nodded. "Yeah, Rosanna's doing that. Triphasil. But we're using condoms for the first cycle, just to be sure."

I thought briefly about lecturing him on safe sex, but discarded the idea. Lin seemed to be in charge of things, including Nevins.

"If you really want to know any more detail, you probably need to ask someone who isn't gay," I said helpfully. "What about Dr. M? I think he's been married."

Nevins looked horrorstruck at the suggestion and I left him quietly whimpering at the thought and went back to join Lin. Perhaps she would ask me new and exciting questions about what men like, questions that I actually knew the answer to.

I stayed close enough to Andrew to be able to ogle him unobtrusively, just for the entertainment value. He was sombre, everyone was, standing around in groups, talking

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

quietly amongst themselves. No mobiles rang, no pagers buzzed, the young woman from the BMA meeting had swollen eyes from crying. I wondered what it felt like to leave your patients like this. I hadn't really developed a feeling of attachment to any of the patients yet, and I guessed I wouldn't until I was really working, perhaps on my long placement next term.

I ate my curry sandwich at about eleven, starving as always, and my eyes settled on Andrew. His key was safely on my key ring, the security code for the alarm system was in my pocket. We were lovers, I was eating his sandwiches, tonight he was going to take me somewhere...

A PCA from our ward came out of the hospital, distinctive in her hideous mint green uniform and pressure-bandaged legs, and I heard her say, "Excuse me, Dr. Maynard, there's a problem with a medication chart on the ward. You're needed."

His eyes caught mine as he turned around to pat Dr. Seagate's shoulder. He looked completely exhausted.

He walked beside the PCA back into the hospital, the crowd of doctors between him and the door parting silently to let him through. It was the least militant picket line I'd ever heard of.

Chapter Thirty

There was an unfamiliar nurse waiting for me at the nurses' station, a medication chart in her hand.

She was an agency nurse. Damn.

"I'm Dr. Maynard," I said to her. I couldn't raise a smile, not under the circumstances.

She held the chart out to me. "I think there's been a prescribing mistake, doctor. Mrs. Silva has two opiates prescribed for her. I've withheld her ten a.m. dose of pethidine until you can clarify the chart."

There was nothing I could do, so I took out a pen and wrote 'cease' across the orders for morphine and pethidine and blocked out the chart to reflect this. I wrote Mrs. Silva for the maximum legal dose of methadone, added as much oxycodone as I could prescribe, and handed the chart back to the nurse. "I'll call pharmacy to arrange the methadone. Please give Mrs. Silva a dose of oxycodone stat."

The nurse narrowed her eyes at me a little after she had checked the changes to the chart. "Doctor," she said. "This is a very high dose of opiates for Mrs. Silva. She's already having trouble maintaining her airway and her respirations are suppressed."

"Thank you for pointing out the obvious," I said to her, my patience wearing thin. "If you noticed, Mrs. Silva is NFR. I have no intention of going against her family's wishes and intubating her. And I have no intention of allowing her to die in pain. Dr. Jackson is the senior consulting physician if you would like to contact him. Excuse me."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I stalked off down the ward. Hopefully she'd page Dr. Jackson. He wasn't on strike; he was at his private practice on Mondays. And he'd rip her a new one if she disturbed him there. He was rabidly pro-euthanasia, had even gone to the Netherlands to a euthanasia conference at his own expense, and he was on Jack Kevorkian's personal mailing list.

I pushed the door to Mrs. Silva's door open quietly. David, one of the ward nurses, was specializing her, and he looked up from where he was doing mouthcare. John was asleep in a chair beside the bed, his sister's hand in his own, his face on the bed beside her hand. God, I hoped somebody would care for me so conscientiously in my last few hours.

David stood up and handed me the fluid balance chart and pointed at the tally. I nodded my agreement, flicked through the file to find the IV orders, and ceased the hydration. Her kidneys had shut down; there was no point in continuing to hydrate her.

I could trust David to keep Mrs. Silva's skin moisturised and to treat her eyes with the tear replacement drops.

David turned the hydration IV off and I just stood for a moment. Mrs. Silva looked younger now, some of her deep wrinkles plumped out by the fluid that was overloading her. Her colour was bad, her breathing irregular. I didn't disturb her by listening to her heart and lungs; there was nothing to be gained, there was nothing I could do now.

Good nursing care was what she needed.

"Wake him," I whispered to David. "He'll be heartbroken if he's not there."

David nodded, and I slipped out of the room.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Clive was the CN on duty, and he was in the treatment room when I went looking for him.

I stood in the doorway while he drew up the antibiotics he was making up and waited for him to finish. Never startle a nurse with a loaded syringe, just in case.

He looked up at me and nodded a greeting as he squeezed the IV bag to mix it.

"Dr. M," he said. "You came up to see Mrs. Silva? The agency nurse demanded we call you and wouldn't be talked out of it."

"Yeah," I said. Fuck, I was tired. "I've put her on oxycodone and methadone. I'll go and do the request form for the methadone now. Send someone down for me when she dies and I'll pronounce her."

Clive nodded. "Will do," he said.

I left him and went and sat at the nurses' station where I filled out the requisition form for the methadone, and called the pharmacy to expedite it. The stuff was horribly addictive and pharmacy always wanted to check the usage and counter-approve before dispensing. Paranoid bastards.

I looked up to find myself being smiled at by one of the administration's flunkies. He was a human resources case manager according to his ID card, and it sounded ominous.

"Dr. Maynard?" he said.

I nodded and he handed me an envelope and walked off.

Looked like I wouldn't be pronouncing Mrs. Silva after all. I pushed my dismissal notice into my pocket and got into the elevator.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Matthew was sitting on the pavement, waving what I suspected was a curry sandwich around with one hand as he talked to Lizzie from Micro. The sun was making his hair shine and it was the most gorgeous colour. Not brown at all, more like titian.

Being sacked certainly made one thing easier.

F was drinking a takeaway cup of coffee and it smelled great. I spotted the boxes of coffees lined up beside the statue of some git in a greatcoat with an inadequate gun. I agreed with the pigeons.

I took my coffee back to F and handed him my letter for him to read.

He scanned it and handed it back to me, then took my elbow and walked me across the courtyard to the dank walkway where the homeless lived.

Two shaggy old men looked up at me and one of them grinned toothlessly and held up his cup of takeaway coffee. I held my own up in greeting. Guess it was a good day for them; no rain and free coffee.

F said, "Had you thought about a change?"

"Looks like change has been thrust upon me," I replied.

"No, a real change. London have headhunted me, offered me a consultancy there, along with a research grant. Come across with me, change to renal."

I stared at F.

"Nephrology?" I said.

He nodded.

I looked at the two old men in their grimy clothes, made happy by an unexpected free cup of coffee.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"I don't like nephrology," I said. "All those blood levels to monitor. Transplants to manage." I shook my head.

"No?" F said disbelievingly.

I knew that in his little world, there was nothing better than a dodgy kidney, but I'd rather be a general practitioner than deal with renal.

"What do you want, then?" he said. "Go on, tell me what you want. I've not accepted their offer yet, I can always counteroffer and include you in the deal."

"And Clarissa," I said. "If they sacked me, they're going to sack her, too. And there's no shortage of surgical residents out there."

"Sure, Clarissa, too. So, what do you want? Name your specialty."

I blinked. F was kidding, right? He couldn't possibly be serious about this.

"Gastro?" F asked. "Hematology? Rheumatology? Endocrinology? Take your pick."

Fuck. This was not a question I'd ever allowed myself to think about. I'd blown my chance of a specialist career path when I'd left the US partway through my first posting as something other than a resident.

"Palliative care," I said.

F rolled his eyes. "Fuck, Andrew, choose something with a bit of glamour, a bit of lifestyle in it, so you can buy yourself and your pretty boyfriend a decent car each."

I glared at him and he looked contrite.

"Sorry," he said. "That was out of line."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"No problem," I replied. However bad a day I was having, F's must be much worse.

Chapter Thirty One

A familiar voice made me look up from my sandwich, and I stood up in time for a pale, but surprisingly neat and tidy, Heidi to bounce into my arms. "Matthew!" she cried, hugging me hard.

Angie was right behind her, blue plastic hospital bag in one hand, bunch of flowers in the other.

"You're coming home?" I asked Heidi.

"I am," she said, beaming. "I've got to come back here at the end of the week to have the stitches out, so I'm going to Mum's for a few days, but I'll be back at the house on Friday."

Angie smiled at me. "Say thank you to that nice boyfriend of yours for us," she said. "I'm going to take Heidi home now."

* * * *

I spent the day listening to the doctors around me talking about their work, their careers, and the responsibilities they carried, and it made me feel very small and inadequate. How was I ever supposed to cope with any of this?

The shadows were slanting across the courtyard and the homeless old men had picked up their shopping bags and shuffled into the hospital, pausing to beg coins from the doctors. My bum was numb from sitting on the concrete when there was suddenly movement; doctors were hugging each other, and Dr. Seagate was going around shaking people's hands and thanking them.

I struggled to my feet, trying to stamp the pins and needles out of my feet, when he hugged me, much to my amazement, and said, "Is he bringing you along to my place later? After we've been to the pub?"

"Um, yes," I said. "He asked me anyway."

Dr. Seagate nodded, looking serious. "Make him happy, I'll love you forever, and believe me, that's not an offer I make very often."

I stared at him and he quirked me a smile and turned to talk to the BMA lawyer, leaving me gobsmacked. It had never occurred to me that Andrew might have told someone about me. Especially another doctor at the hospital.

Nevins came over. "Are you coming to the pub? One of the burns unit residents invited us all."

"Sure." Nevins was so obviously pleased that I couldn't resist it. "Just like we're real people, right?"

Lin walked up just in time to catch this and she shook her head at me. "Leave him alone, Blake, you'll only make it worse."

"Make what worse?" Nevins asked.

Lin slipped her hand under his arm. "He's teasing you," she said to Nevins. "Ignore him, you're only encouraging him."

I had to work at not laughing at Nevins' look of confusion when she led him off. I knew the bloke was smart, he'd thrashed me in biochem, but he really seemed to not be awake half of the time.

Of course, it could be that. Maybe he was desperately sleep-deprived.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I was surprised that Andrew came to the pub, too, and didn't head back into the hospital with most of the doctors. It seemed to me that someone who was so dedicated that they got up at three in the morning to do rounds would want to check that nothing had happened in his absence, but Andrew was leaning against the bar, drinking hard with the young woman who had seconded his motion at the meeting.

I thought about going over to stand with him, but it felt like it would just be too conspicuous in front of Lin and Nevins so I stayed with them, listening to tales of horror from a brand new resident who had had four hours sleep since Friday afternoon.

She was too tired to sleep, she explained, as she downed glasses of Kahlua and Coke as fast as the barman could make them.

I was drinking lager with whiskey shooters, since Dr. Seagate had held up a credit card when we'd walked in and announced the drinks were on him. Free booze was too good a thing to turn down, and Lin and Nevins were getting stuck into it, too.

I was engrossed in conversation with the resident, who I was beginning to suspect was trying to pick me up, when Lin and Nevins disappeared. I looked up from dodging yet another flutter of eyelashes against skin so dark from lack of sleep the woman might just as well be wearing goth eyeliner, and they'd gone.

I was sure they hadn't left the bar, because Lin's backpack was where she had abandoned it under the table. The resident, whose name was Tracey, or so she kept telling me,

nodded at the loos. "Think they've gone off for a shag." I groaned mentally.

That was my fault. The bar was completely full of doctors, and they were shagging within earshot of actual and potential supervisors, assessors, and tutors. Hardly prudent.

Then I looked up to find Andrew watching me across the crowded bar, and I felt myself colour bright red. Yeah, that was right, there was no moral high ground on this one, and Andrew had a lot more to lose than either Lin or Nevins, like his job.

Tracey obviously took my flush as proof of interest and groped me under the table, squeezing my thigh inexpertly. What was it about doctors? Did they all have absolutely no idea about sex?

Andrew had his back to me, leaning against the bar in the way that totally drunk people do, and he looked damned hot. God, last night had been good, but it hadn't been enough.

I fended off Tracey's hand, picked up my lager and walked through the crowd to stand beside Andrew.

He turned around and smiled crookedly at me. I didn't know him well, but something was wrong—or right, perhaps?

"I was just going to come looking for you," he said. "Ready to leave? Want to go round up Lin and Nevins?"

Dr. Seagate slung his arm around Andrew's shoulders. "I called the taxi company."

Andrew pecked Dr. Seagate on the cheek quickly and said, "Okay, quack," and they both dissolved into laughter.

I stood in front of the loo doors. There was only two options, they had to be behind one of the doors, so I pushed

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

the women's loo door open and called out, "Lin, Nevins, we're leaving. If you want to come along, hurry up."

The woman fixing her make-up in the mirror glared at me so I shrugged at her and left to repeat the process in the gent's loo.

I didn't hang around to find out which one they had been in.

Chapter Thirty Two

F had been feeding Clarissa and me whiskey in vast quantities, presumably expunging his guilt at having started this whole mess off, when he wasn't ducking out of the bar to stand on the pavement with his cell phone and conduct top secret negotiations to try to get both Clarissa and me jobs at London.

Clarissa was completely drunk, clinging onto me in an attempt to stand up, and I led her out of the bar to the bus stop outside and sat her on the seat, hoping she wasn't planning on throwing up in the taxi.

"Sorry," I said to the couple making out in the bus shelter. "Alcohol-induced emergency here."

Clarissa leaned sideways against the shelter and I looked at the couple beside me again.

Obviously I was drunk, too, because I'd failed to notice that the man was achondroplastic and was actually standing on the bus stop seat to reach the young woman he was kissing.

Only he wasn't achondroplastic, at least not the common version. Judging by his hands, currently groping the woman's ass, and his narrow torso, and the shape of his mouth when he'd said, "No problems," he had EVC syndrome.

Elis-van Creveld. Now there was a rare autosomal recessive syndrome, and I wondered how someone of Old Order Amish descent had wound up making out in a London bus shelter.

Clarissa said, "I don't feel very well, Andrew," so I helped her to her feet and took her to the gutter to throw up.

A strong and inspiring start to the evening.

The taxis began to arrive and after putting Clarissa into one, with an open window beside her, I looked around for Matthew. There were about thirty of us, by the look of it, all trying to get into the five taxis F had ordered, and I grabbed Matthew's hand and pulled him into the same taxi as me.

If I was going to be squashed into a car with too many drunken doctors, I was going to do it with Matthew pushed up against me.

Lin and Nevins appeared at the door of the pub and rushed into the same taxi as us, piling in just as the first taxi took off.

"All set?" the driver asked, and he turned his indicator on and pulled out into the traffic without waiting for an answer, or for Lin to close the door.

There were too many of us in the cab and Matthew was half across my knees so I pulled him properly into my lap, giving Jilly, one of the psych registrars, room to sit. Jilly was six months pregnant, so she needed the extra space.

"Thanks, Andrew," she said, grinning at me and patting her belly.

Matthew was tense on my lap, not that Lin and Nevins were paying any attention to us. They were sitting on the floor of the cab and Nevins had his arm around Lin. They were obviously wrapped up in each other, so I stroked Matthew's arm and smiled at him when he turned to look at me curiously in the flickering of the passing streetlights.

I wanted to tell him that I'd been fired, that it was all okay, but this wasn't the time, not with everyone listening. There would just be too much explaining to do.

The taxi pulled up outside F's place and Matthew scrambled out of my lap so I concentrated on helping Jilly out of the taxi.

Matthew was standing stock still in F's living room, gazing around. I guess I'd got used to F's conspicuous consumption, but Matthew's surprise made me look at it through fresh eyes. F'd told me once how much the view he had of the Thames had cost him, but it hurt to think about, even as drunk as I was.

Lena, F's girlfriend, hadn't been at the pub, so I'd assumed she'd been working, but she was waiting for us at F's apartment, and she took Clarissa away, holding tightly on her arm, presumably to put her to bed.

When I stood beside Matthew, he said, "There's a bong on the coffee table, just like my place."

"There always is at F's," I explained. "Though when I've brought Henry over to fight with his kids, he's always put it away." I looked at the plump cream sofas, with luxuriant deep blue throw rugs over them, and the gleaming wooden floors, and said, "No beer can tower though."

F said, "What don't I have?" as he walked put to put the ornately carved box that he kept his stash in beside the bong.

"A beer can tower," I said, and F chuckled.

"God, no. I haven't had one of them for years. I'm embarrassed enough about the number of empty wine bottles I put out every week."

"You could make a wine bottle tower," Matthew suggested, much to my surprise. I had no idea he was acquainted enough with F to joke with him.

F chortled beside me. "Hell, yes. With the coloured bottles alternating with clear, all held together with Transpore. It'll be a tribute to my misspent youth, may it last forever." F raised his glass and said, "Fuck, you two need a drink. Booze is in the kitchen."

There were platters of food in the kitchen, sandwiches and little pastries and the inevitable samosas, all covered with clear plastic and bearing the name of a large catering company. That was typical F, too, throwing money around, or rather debt.

I pulled Matthew into my arms when he opened overhead cupboards in search of glasses, and he settled back against me as I nuzzled his neck. "Mmm," he said. "Aren't you worried someone will walk in? And make trouble for you at work?"

I took a step back so I was leaning against a counter, the polished granite digging into my back, pulling Matthew with me so he was pressed against me firmly, his ass available and inviting against my groin.

"No," I said against his neck. "Read this while I grope you." I stopped fondling him with one hand for long enough to pull my dismissal notice out of my trouser pocket and hand it to him, then went back to sucking on the tender skin of his neck while he read the letter.

Someone walked in, said, "Oops," and walked out again, and I had a really indulgent grind against Matthew, making him squirm and chuckle as he read.

Then he stopped squirming and said, "Fuck! They fired you!"

"Yep," I said. "Not your tutor any more."

Matthew turned around in my arms, sliding one thigh between mine, giving the most heavenly pressure against my cock, and wrapped his arms around my neck. "Aren't you angry? Or upset? Because they fired you?"

"Too tired and horny to be angry," I said, eyes fixed on Matthew's lips. Fuck, he had stunning lips, just made for ... "Ask me tomorrow after ten hours sleep and three fucks."

Okay, Matthew was grinding this time.

F walked in, opened the fridge, and said over his shoulder, "You've got the spare room tonight, if we can stick Clarissa into a taxi without her puking. Save it for then."

God, I loved F at times, even if he had a seven-figure mortgage.

Chapter Thirty Three

It felt weird to have Andrew's arms around me in front of people who weren't drug-fucked engineering students. Maybe they were all drug-fucked doctors? Nevins had sprayed red wine across the coffee table when Andrew had decided he was too pissed to still stand up, and had sat down on one of the gorgeous couches and pulled me into his lap.

Lin, on the other hand, had just looked smug, which made me wonder exactly how much she'd worked out for herself.

The food was good, and the three of us med students were made conspicuous by the enthusiasm with which we stuffed ourselves with it. Free food was almost as good as free booze.

Usually, if someone was passing around free buckets, I'd be in there, getting shit-faced, but I just passed the bong on to the giggling nurse beside me. I didn't hand it to Andrew, whose lap I was still ensconced on, either. If he wanted three fucks, we were both going to have to sober up a little.

Sometime during the evening, when it was completely dark and tiny lights were glittering on the Thames, more people began to arrive, nurses coming off afternoon shift, doctors who had been at the strike and had then gone to do rounds. I recognised some of them from the ward.

Jane sat down wearily beside us, not even blinking at Andrew's arm around my waist. She leaned her head back against the couch and groaned, then kicked her sneakers off and put her sock-clad feet up on the coffee table amongst the wine glasses and bottles.

"Mrs. Silva died," she said, and Andrew's hand tightened around my waist.

I remembered Mrs. Silva. Andrew had described her as a 'train wreck', which apparently was the technical term for cascading multiple organ failure.

"Who pronounced?" Andrew asked. "It should have been me, but I couldn't."

"Jackie came in to do it when I rang him and explained you'd been fired," Jane said, opening her eyes and taking the glass of wine that Dr. Seagate ... F, I supposed I was allowed to call him now, handed her.

"No problems?" Andrew said cautiously.

"Nope." She sighed as she drank her first mouthful of wine. "There'll have to be a PM, but it'll only be a perfunctory one. He took care of that. He also said to tell you to contact him, and he'll write you the best damn reference anyone has ever seen."

Andrew's fingers slid up my neck and into my curls and drew tiny circles. "Thanks." I melted against him, resting my head on his shoulder.

She glanced at me briefly, as though I was some kind of strange lizard she'd found under a rock, then turned her attention to the food on the table.

I had to wait to get into the bathroom until the pregnant woman had finished, so it was a relief to finally get in there. The bathroom was just as opulent as the rest of the place, and I couldn't resist having a snoop around. It would be useful to find some condoms and lube since I hadn't brought

my backpack with me today, and I hadn't noticed Andrew carrying one either.

There were condoms in the cupboard, amongst the detritus of equipment presumably nicked from the hospital, so I took a couple, along with some examination gloves. I hunted through the rolls of surgical tape, steristrips, and debriding scissors, and found sachets of lube, so I took a couple of them, too, stuffing them into my pocket.

I picked up a roll of Microfoam tape and put that in the other pocket, grinning to myself in the mirror. Oh, yeah, I could use that tape.

Andrew stood silently in the middle of the guest room while I dragged one of the removal boxes the room was stacked with across the door to stop anyone from barging in. I pulled the fancy bedcover off the bed and dumped that on the floor, then pulled the blankets down, too. If you were going to fuck in someone else's bed, it was always a smart move to make sure the come only spread across the easily washable surfaces. That was a lesson I'd learnt the hard way.

I unbuttoned his shirt slowly, and it felt like I was peeling the layers off him, layers of worry and stress and sadness, when I unbuttoned the cuffs and slid his arms out of the fabric.

I didn't look at his face, not at the moment when he exhaled slowly and deeply. I wanted to give him a moment to surrender first.

When I did look up from unbuttoning his belt, his eyes were closed and his tongue was protruding slightly between his teeth, so I kissed his mouth gently, kissing away the

tension that was creasing his face, taking us both back to the place we had found at his house.

There was a stillness to this room now, more than an absence of motion, and it was this I wanted to give Andrew.

"Hold out your hands," I whispered. There was a distant surge of laughter from the lounge room, and a clink of glasses.

Andrew lifted his hands for me, holding them out. I guided them together, turning his hands over so his wrists pressed together, then reached into my pocket for the surgical tape. I wound the tape gently around his wrists, binding them together, and Andrew whimpered.

It was all I could do not to just drop to my knees then, and blow him, so I took a step back and nodded at the bed with my head, not trusting my voice at that moment.

I knelt down and undid Andrew's shoelaces and pulled his shoes off. They were scuffed at the toes and worn down at the heels. I pulled his socks off, circled my hands around his ankles, and slid my hands up to Andrew's calves underneath his trousers.

He moaned when I sucked on the skin of his ankle and whispered, "Please, Matthew."

I stood up and looked down at him, then tossed the supplies on the bed. His eyes were huge when they looked up at me and I traced his lips with one finger, then unbuttoned my shirt and dropped it on the floor.

I trod on the toe of each sock in turn, stepping out of them, then undid the top button of my fly. There was a lull in the background noise from the lounge room and my zip

rasped loud in the room as I slid it down. I could hear Andrew's breathing and my own.

"Fuck," he whispered as my trousers slid off. I stepped closer, leaving behind the trousers, and he leaned forward, hands between his knees, and pressed his mouth over where my cock was stretching my underwear tight.

I ached; not just my cock, but all of me, ached for him. The feel of his mouth, the wetness of his breath through the fabric, was agonizingly good so I let him mouth me, biting gently, licking so his tongue rasped against the cotton.

He looked up at me, mouth open, saliva stretching between his lips and I distantly heard the pop of a champagne cork and a cheer. I pushed my underwear slowly down and my cock bobbed out of confinement. Andrew leaned forward again in slow motion, taking the head of my cock into his mouth, sliding his tongue over the beads, pressing gently on them in a way that sent shivers through my entire body.

I held my cock steady for him, since his hands weren't free, and he began to suck me slowly and gently, every touch and slide and lick feeling so good that it made me want to scream. I probably was going to scream eventually, it was kind of inevitable, but hopefully not for a good long while yet.

"Stop," I whispered, and Andrew looked up at me, pausing with his mouth open, the head of my cock resting against his bottom lip.

"Stand up," I said, stepping back to give him room.

He stood and I unbuckled his belt and undressed him. He looked painfully hard, the head of his cock deep red, but that was something I was going to fix for him.

We kissed and he let me take the lead, then I stacked the pillows against the headboard for him to lean against and pointed for him to get on the bed.

I knelt on the bed, too, pulled a pair of the scrounged gloves on, and carefully lubed up two of my fingers. I thought for a moment about lubing my whole hand but discarded the idea. For that, we needed more privacy, so that Andrew could scream the place down if he wanted to.

He spread his legs, giving me as much access as I wanted as I pressed the two fingers against his ass. I didn't push in, not until I'd bent forward and taken the head of his cock into my mouth, too.

He was unravelling, beginning to moan, even before I'd really begun to please him, just at the feel of my fingers sliding into him, so I lifted my head from his cock to watch his face.

He had his head tipped back, biting his lip, presumably to keep himself silent, and his hands were held up against his chest, the surgical tape digging into his skin. I pushed my fingers in slowly, pulled them back out, pushed in again.

Sweat beaded his brow now, and when he opened his eyes there was so much in them. I'd never had a submissive like him before, not one who was so honest with himself about what he wanted. He didn't want leather and studs and theatrics, there was no 'Yes, master,' from him. This was unscripted, a simple transaction between two humans in which he gave himself to me.

I curled my fingers and he gave a stifled cry through clenched lips.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He was leaking when I took his cock back into my mouth, slippery and strong, so I took as much of him in as I could and just held his cock steady while I finger-fucked him slowly.

He held back, moaning quietly, my hand and mouth working him slowly, making him tremble, but I would have kept going for as long as it took.

He clutched at my head ineffectually with his bound hands and thrust up into my mouth, groaning loudly as he came.

It was all I could do to swallow his come, swallowing for as long as he kept thrusting, his body clamped hard around my fingers, until he slumped back on the pillows bonelessly.

His cock slid out of my mouth as he softened and I crawled up the bed and stretched out beside him, my face pressed against his neck, his taste filling my mouth.

Chapter Thirty Four

When I opened my eyes, Matthew was propped up on one elbow, watching me, a secretive smile on his face.

"Hello," he said.

"Was I gone long?" I tried to rub my face and remembered my hands were bound together.

"Not long." His fingers stroked my cheek gently. "You ready for me?"

"Yeah," I said, and my voice came out as a whisper.

I rolled onto my side and Matthew moved pillows so I could lie down more easily. He pulled a sheet and some blankets over me, too, settling the bedding around me, his body warm and lean and so alive pressed against mine.

I closed my eyes and listened to the rustle of the condom packet, breathing slowly and deeply, letting the rhythm wash through me.

The head of Matthew's cock nudged against my ass, and I moved a little, lifting one leg, rolling a little, making sure I was in the right position for him.

He breached me slowly and carefully and we both sighed. His breath was warm and flickered across my neck, his hand stroked down my arm to where I was holding my bound hands against my chest.

I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but words were superfluous when he was easing into me. There were tiny stings of pain, glittering sharp pinpoints inside me, and he eased them away, stroking my hands, kissing my shoulder, whispering little flitters of sounds that I couldn't understand.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He was fully inside me, holding still. We were breathing in tandem and I could feel my pulse speeding up, making me push my bound hands down against my belly so I could curl my fingers around my own cock.

His hand covered mine and I went to pull my own hands back. I should have asked, should have apologised for not asking, but he shushed me and moved my hands back where they had been.

He began to rock into me, slow and sweet and deep, each thrust pushing my cock into my hands, making me shiver and moan and move, too, rocking back against him.

We fucked like that, slowly and carefully, moving together until my skin began to slip away from me, my life, my thoughts, leaving me open and vulnerable, so full of him. I couldn't still my tongue, so I whispered, streams of words, falling and stumbling out of my mouth.

He didn't silence me or try to stop the flow and his mouth was moving against my shoulder, whispering, too, words that slipped through my mind without me being able to hear them.

It seemed to me I could hear the river gliding past and it made me want to go home, wherever home might be; Los Angeles, New York, my house, my office ... I wasn't sure where, but I wanted to be there with Matthew, just so we could be quiet and still, and he could slide into me like this every night, rocking my troubles away.

He guided my hands off my cock, replaced them with one of his own, slick with lube, so cool and smooth and wet, and that was his gift to me. He was going to let me come again.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

The noise from the next room ebbed and flowed around me as Matthew stroked into me differently, shallow strokes, pressing forward, making me moan more loudly now.

I would have slipped away if his arms weren't wrapped around me, shed my skin completely without his certainty and strength.

My face was wet and I was beginning to tremble. There was too much feeling inside me, too much sensation, too much hunger, to belong to just one place and one time.

"Let go," he whispered against my shoulder. "I'll hold you, just let go."

My pulse was a roar in my ears. Matthew held his cock still inside me, half way in, half way out, so I was poised on the edge...

I went over quietly, not resisting, not holding back, letting go just like Matthew had told me to, leaving me weak, slack-mouthed and pliant, my face pressed into the pillow.

Matthew began to thrust again, deep and hard, driving himself in further each time, then he came, groaning and twisting against my back.

He slid out of me far too soon, and I would have felt abandoned except that his arms were holding me, firm and secure around my chest.

He rolled me onto my back and through half-open eyes I could see that he was smiling.

Gentle hands cut and peeled the tape from my wrists, and I closed my eyes completely when Matthew kissed my wrists carefully.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"I'm just going to turn the light off," he whispered and I nodded.

His arms left me for a moment, then the room was dark and he was back beside me. "Go to sleep, sweetheart," he said as he pulled the covers over both of us and settled my head on his shoulder.

I fell asleep with the feeling of him stroking my hair gently.

Chapter Thirty Five

It was the sound of a horn on a barge that woke me, I think, and I yawned and stretched. Andrew's arm was draped across my chest.

He was deeply asleep when I turned my head to look at him, jaw slack, breathing slow and peaceful. He was going to be asleep for hours.

I needed to piss and was damn sure I couldn't wait hours, so I eased his arm off me and slid out of the bed.

I found my underwear and trousers and pulled them on, then pushed the cardboard carton blocking the door out of the way as quietly as I could. Andrew didn't even stir.

I pissed, which was an enormous relief, and washed my hands, and helped myself to more lube sachets, then decided I needed to rehydrate in a major way. And if I was thirsty, it was an indication that Andrew was going to have the hangover from hell when he eventually woke up.

There was a woman in a bathrobe in the kitchen, surrounded by vast quantities of used plates and glasses and mugs. She looked kind of dyed and plucked and constructed, and far too well-groomed for first thing in the morning, but she smiled at me in a friendly enough way.

"Hi, I'm Lena. You must be Matthew." Her eyes locked on the bars through my nipples. Served me right for not bothering to put a shirt on. I could deal with straight women asking about my piercings, even first thing in the morning.

"Yeah, I'm Matthew," I said. "I think Andrew's going to have a killer hangover when he wakes up. Have you got any electrolyte replacement fluid?"

She tore her eyes away from my nipples for a moment to nod. "Sure, it wouldn't be F's place without Gatorade." She opened a cupboard and gave me two bottles of vile blue liquid.

"Thanks."

Her eyes were back on my nipples. Here we go; she was going to ask to touch them.

"Um, would I be able to just, you know, touch them?" she asked, looking coy.

"As long as I get to touch your nipples, too," I said, and she spluttered at me.

"But ... You can't ... That's completely different!" she said, drawing her bathrobe more tightly closed around herself.

"It's what you wanted to do to me," I pointed out.

She took the kettle over to the sink stacked with dirty dishes, filled it, and put it on to boil. "All right," she said when she turned back to face me.

Damn. About one time in ten, the woman was either sufficiently curious or sufficiently comfortable in her own body to take up the offer. Looked like Lena was that one in ten.

She unbelted her bathrobe so it hung open and stepped up close to me. She had decent breasts, full and plump, with dark areolas and large nipples, not that I was a connoisseur of breasts.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

She touched the bar through my left nipple cautiously, then the right one. "They don't hurt," I said. "So you can touch them more firmly."

I pinched her nipples between my thumb and forefinger and rolled them a little, hoping to get this over, and she became more confident, trying the feel of squeezing them and pulling on the bars.

"Why?" she asked. "Why do you have them?"

"They make my nipples far more sensitive for sex," I told her. "And I think they look hot." I tugged on her nipples a little.

When I looked up, F was leaning against the dining room doorway, shaking his head, a look of disbelief on his face and I couldn't help but crack a smile at him.

Lena leapt back from me, presumably when she worked out that F was standing behind her, and pulled her robe tight around herself again.

"Go on, ask Matthew about his genital piercing," F said. "Maybe he'll let you play with that one, too."

Lena made this strangled noise and I caught the glint in F's eyes. He was an evil bastard, but I wasn't above playing along.

"Do you want to see it?" I asked Lena, undoing the button at the top of my fly and beginning to unzip myself.

Lena looked like she was about to die of embarrassment, whereas F was nearly convulsed with laughter. She shrieked when I undid my zip completely and reached into my underwear and F let out a wheezing gasp and clung onto the kitchen bench top.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I pulled my cock out and Lena screamed, waved her hands at me, and scrunched her eyes shut tightly. I really hoped that F wasn't going to herniate anything, the way he was laughing.

I zipped my trousers back up and began to laugh, too. There wasn't anything quite as good as teasing women, especially the ones who wanted to touch.

Lena rushed out of the kitchen and I heard the bathroom door slam shut. I sank down onto the kitchen floor and let myself laugh long and hard.

"Fucking hell, Matthew," F managed to gasp. "I didn't think you'd really do it!"

I was laughing so hard my ribs were aching, partly at F's completely over the top reaction, but I managed to get out, "If she turns into a fag hag, that's your fault."

F wiped his face and said, "Give her twenty minutes, she'll work out what it's for, then you can tease her all over again."

I hauled myself back up to my feet again and picked up the two bottles of Gatorade, wondering if all the ruckus had woken Andrew.

F held out a small screw top jar. "B12," he said. "Feed some to Andrew."

I took the bottle. I could do with one myself.

Chapter Thirty Six

Waking up happened slowly. I was aware of sunlight slanting through wooden slatted blinds, of faint traffic noise, of someone beside me turning the pages of a book occasionally.

I could feel him breathing, and the warmth from his body soaking into mine. My body had that vaguely sore feeling that sleeping for too long gave me. I wasn't used to lying still for that long.

The page of a book whispered again and I rolled onto my side and smiled at Matthew.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Want something to drink?"

I swallowed. My mouth was as dry as dust, and I suspected that the moment I moved, I'd know all about the size of my brain compared to the size of my meningeal membrane. "Yeah."

Matthew leaned over the edge of the bed and sat up again, bottle of Gatorade in his hand.

I took the bottle and struggled upright, unscrewed the cap and chugged half the bottle down fast. It should have tasted vile, kind of like the lining of a child's paddling pool, but it was a sign of how dehydrated I was that the stuff just slid down my throat, smooth as any single malt.

Matthew held out a small bottle of B12 to me, and I took it gratefully and swallowed two. F was completely reliable that way; he would never leave a guest to suffer a hangover without the appropriate remedy. I'd seen him give himself IM B12 after a big night, before facing a full day at the hospital.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I lay back down again and I could have sworn I felt my body picking up the fluid while I lay there.

When I closed my eyes again, the pages of the book went back to whispering, and I said, "What are you reading?"

"Fiction." Matthew sounded so pleased. I remembered the last time I'd studied so hard that I'd lost the ability to enjoy fiction. It was the most recent time I'd had a go at my physician's exams, and it had not been pleasant. After the exam, I'd read everything that wasn't nailed down, reveling in words that I didn't have to be able to regurgitate at will.

It was a Tuesday morning, quite late by the feel of it, and I was in bed with my lover. Neither of us had to go anywhere, my phone was off, and I'd handed my pager in at the Enquiries desk at the hospital as I'd walked out after being fired.

It made me smile, despite how my body felt.

"Tell me about the book," I said, not opening my eyes. Oh, yeah, my body was just soaking up the potassium and sodium.

"It's a murder mystery," Matthew said. The mattress dipped beside me as he moved and his leg slid over mine.

"Lots of characters with backstories I don't know. A pathetic dead body in a graveyard, some obscure literary references, and a baby with Apert's syndrome. I could tell you about Apert's syndrome if you'd like."

"Tell me about Elis-van Creveld syndrome instead," I said. I hoped the man in the bus shelter had scored last night.

"Don't know anything about Elis-van Creveld," Matthew said. "Except that somebody had an unfortunate surname."

He was stroking my inner thigh now, and I smiled as pleasure washed through me.

"Two people," I said. "Who talked about their patients on a train." Bedding slid off my chest and Matthew's mouth settled on my nipple. I couldn't remember the last time I'd made love in the morning. Presumably Kendra and I had, before Henry had arrived.

I could feel the stubble on Matthew's jawline rubbing against my chest and it was sending sparks of arousal from my nipple directly to my cock.

There were gloves on the packing case beside the bed, and sachets of lube, and my head didn't hurt when I reached out for them.

Matthew rolled onto his back willingly and whispered, "Yeah," when I pressed two fingers inside him.

The bedding slid off us and he was aching beautiful in the morning light. "Will you touch yourself?" I asked him, and he curled long fingers around his cock and began to stroke himself.

His nipple was hard in my mouth, the bar metallic against my teeth, and he moaned and squirmed on the bed as I sucked and tongued the bar.

"Fuck, Andrew, I can't take much of this," he moaned. "Fuck me? Now?"

There was a condom beside the bed so I rolled it on myself quickly, and smeared lube over the latex. We were making a hell of a mess of F's sheets.

I'd been in a screaming hurry the only time I'd fucked Matthew before, but this time I eased myself in slowly,

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

watching his face. He tipped his head back, exposing the smooth stretch of his throat, closing his eyes. I licked a long, slow line up his neck, waiting with trembling expectation for his body to relax and accept me.

"Yes," he whispered and I stayed where I was, buried deep inside him, watching his face.

He opened his eyes and gazed into mine.

I knew the exact moment I'd fallen in love with Kendra; we'd been sitting on the back step of her mom's house during summer break from college. She'd been fiddling, playing Lynyrd Skynyrd covers and I'd been sketching her, trying to catch the sawing of her bow arm. I'd put down my sketchpad, entranced by the expression of joy on her face, and fallen in love with her.

It was lube that coated my fingers, not charcoal, when I fell in love with Matthew.

Moisture leaked out of one of my eyes, a drop fell down onto his chin, and he whispered, "Make love to me."

I did, as slowly and gently as I could, giving desire as much time to build as it needed, lingering over every stroke, until Matthew closed his eyes again, overwhelmed. He wasn't quiet, not this time, and every gasp and moan was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard, every whimper made me moan, too.

Each thrust made the bed creak alarmingly, but I didn't care. F would forgive me this once for disturbing his morning, I was sure.

It grew warmer and the bedding slid off the bed completely, down onto the floor. Matthew was moving

underneath me, lifting his hips to meet each thrust in turn, driving us both on, our cries mingling as Matthew clutched at me helplessly. I don't know who came first, or how often, just that there came a time when my body would no longer co-operate and my cock softened, making me grab wildly for the condom as I slid out.

When I collapsed down onto the bed, hopelessly out of breath, Matthew rolled toward me, hugging me. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him back.

"Fuck, that was amazing," he said.

I nodded, kind of impressed he could speak.

He propped himself up on one elbow and touched my face gently, brushing hair back off my forehead, tracing a finger across my morning stubble, smiling at me a little bashfully.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked when my breathing began to slow.

I stroked his forehead in turn, brushing sweat-damp hair back off his face. "Hmm, the past twelve hours have been pretty big on extemporaneous verbalizing for me, so there's any number of things I might have said to you. However, I'm willing to guarantee any and all statements made under these circumstances, especially if they are statements of adoration. I think the only exception to the guarantee would be manifestly wildly inaccurate claims about the size of my penis."

Matthew chuckled and my heart melted a little more. "So, the bit last night when you shouted, 'I've got thirteen inches and they're all for you, baby' wasn't true?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"No, that would be an exaggeration," I said. "Though I could make a claim for the gist of the sentiment being true."

Matthew lifted one of my hands up and examined my wrist, where the skin was a little reddened. He kissed the sore skin carefully and rubbed at some of the adhesive that was caught in my wrist hairs. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked.

I shook my head, and Matthew settled his head down on my chest. I stroked his curls, letting them wrap around my fingers.

"I'm in love with you, too," he said.

Chapter Thirty Seven

The note from F on the kitchen counter had made me chuckle. 'Bloody hell,' was all it said, but it had been enough.

My shirt was rumpled, but I buttoned it up and tucked it into my trousers anyway, then put my shoes on and did them up.

Matthew appeared from the bathroom, towel wrapped around him, still damp from his shower, just as I turned my phone back on. I began to wade through the voicemail.

"You need to call Dr. Anderson, at college, to arrange your new placement," I said when Matthew poured himself a coffee.

"I got that message, too," he said, sitting beside me on the couch. "I'll head over to uni from here. What are you up to today?"

"I've got to go back to the hospital and retrieve my car. I need to take my personal stuff out of my office, though that's only really a carton of books." I looked at Matthew, so perfect and desirable, still not quite believing what had happened. "I need to meet up with Kendra today, too."

"Kendra is your ex, right?" Matthew said. "Henry's mum?"

I nodded. "Have you got any time this afternoon? I'd like you to meet Henry."

"Sure," Matthew said. "What if he hates me?"

"I think that, as long as you don't denounce online gaming, Evercrack, Half-Life, Resident Evil, or WOW, he's going to like you."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Matthew grinned. "I don't think that's going to be an issue. That's what the long summer break is for."

* * * *

I sat at the back of the rehearsal hall, listening to the string section working their way through the same few pages of Stravinsky over and over again. I didn't know the actual piece, despite years of living in an environment saturated with the violin. I doubted that Kendra had learnt much medicine in the time we were together either.

The whole day was washed with a euphoric glow for me, and waiting for Kendra was actually quite a soothing way to pass some time. It was a complete indulgence to not be at work. I was kind of disappointed when the director called for a break, and Kendra walked toward me, wiping her hands on her jeans.

"Hi, babe," she said, kissing my cheek when I stood up. "Come on, I'm dying for a smoke, and don't you dare say a thing."

I followed her out of the building into a courtyard lined with rubbish cans and stood away from the smoke from her cigarette. "We saw you on TV last night. Henry was wildly excited; he's turning into a regular little socialist. What's up? How come you're not at work? You can't possibly have taken a sickie."

"No," I said. "I was fired yesterday, I'm unemployed." She grimaced and took a long drag on her cigarette. "That wasn't actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I guess Henry told you I'm seeing someone?"

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Kendra nodded. "He sure did. Some young guy, I think he said."

"It's, um, looking pretty serious. I wanted you to know in advance that Matthew will probably be around on the weekends when I have Henry."

Kendra's eyes were twinkling when she smiled at me. "I'm glad for you. Unless you've been seeing someone without Henry knowing, you've been single for quite a while."

"It's been too long," I agreed. "I'd like to pick Henry up this afternoon, so he can meet Matthew. That okay with you?"

"That's fine. And thanks for letting me know in advance. You look happy. I haven't seen you look like this for years."

I smiled at Kendra. "I haven't felt like this for years."

She ground out her cigarette. "I've got to go. If we don't get this passage right by this afternoon, there will be new uses for a violin bow demonstrated, and your medical expertise will be needed."

"And I've got to update my CV," I said.

Kendra grinned at me over her shoulder as she disappeared into the rehearsal hall.

* * * *

I dropped into Jackie's rooms, and marveled yet again at how polite and efficient his receptionist was. One day, if I was lucky, I'd work somewhere with pleasant staff.

"Dr. Maynard," Ida said, smiling at me. "Dr. Jackson left a letter here for you, said you'd be dropping in for it."

"Thank you, Ida," I said, taking the envelope she was holding out for me.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"You're welcome, Dr. Maynard. I saw you on the news last night, I think what you were doing was wonderful."

I held up the reference. "Unfortunately, it also means I'm looking for another job."

She smiled conspiratorially and said, "Dr. Jackson is doing what he can for you. I thought you'd like to know that."

"Thanks, it does help," I said. "I'm sure I'll see you again, Ida. Please thank Jackie from me for all his support."

* * * *

Henry bounced into my arms when he opened the door of Kendra's apartment. "Dad!" he shouted. I hugged him and put him down gratefully. He was far too heavy to hold for long. "How come you're not working?" he asked, dragging me by my hand into the apartment. "What you doing here? Wow, you never take time off work."

I sat down on Kendra's couch, Henry still hugging me. "I was fired," I said. "I'm unemployed right at this moment."

Henry's face creased with worry. "That's rank. Is this because of the strike?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my thumb over Henry's forehead, smoothing out the furrows. "You don't need to worry; I'm applying for another, better, job."

He nodded. "I saw you on the news, and F. It was something else." He hugged me again, and it warmed me all the way through to know that Henry was proud of me.

"I came around to see if you'd like to go out. I'd like you to meet Matthew, so I thought we could go for coffee, give you a chance to get to know him a bit before the weekend."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Henry looked a bit dubious as he said, "Okay, Dad."

I patted his shoulder. "He's nothing like Tim. He eats meat, I've seen no evidence so far that he does any form of exercise, and any plans he has to change the world probably involve the practice of medicine, not lecturing kids on the evils of the internet."

This obviously cheered Henry up a little and he said, "So where are we going? There's this great..."

His voice trailed off and I raised an eyebrow at him and said, "Good, you remembered which parent you're with. No you cannot have fries, or cream, or any combination of the two. You know the rules when you're with me, no empty calories."

He bounced off the couch and said, "I'll get out of school uniform," and disappeared down the hall way before reappearing a moment later, and saying, "I'm not fat, just chubby."

I called out after him, "Do you want the childhood obesity lecture again?" and his bedroom door closed resolutely.

I wasn't the kind of insane health and fitness freak that Tim had been, and I didn't try to control how Kendra was raising Henry in my absence, but I refused to feed him crap. I'd become sneaky about persuading him to exercise when he was with me, too. Luckily, London was full of interesting places to walk around, and he was developing a passion for horse-riding. Now all I had to do was persuade him to let me check his blood pressure...

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

He was back in a couple of minutes, wearing jeans and a sweater, looking remarkably clean and tidy for him. It was just possible he'd combed his hair, too.

"So, you're in love with Matthew, right?" he said to me as he bounced down the stairs ahead of me.

"Yep, certainly looks that way," I replied, taking the stairs two at a time.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Dr. Anderson peered over her spectacles at me. "So, you had no problems with Dr. Maynard?" she asked. "Despite him not being able to complete your placement?"

I shook my head. "He was an excellent teacher, really inspirational. I learnt a huge amount from him, we all did."

"His political involvement in the union movement didn't detract from his teaching?"

"No, not at all. I think that it was really important that we learned about how administration doesn't always work toward the same goals as the medical staff, and how sometimes the medical staff has to stand up for their patients."

"All right," Dr. Anderson said. "We've placed your group at St. Georges, with a new tutor. Unfortunately, you're going to have to make up the two days you've missed after finals, so don't make plans to go to Amsterdam the night of your last exam."

"Thanks, Dr. Anderson," I said, standing up.

She stood, too. "Thought you'd like to know that Dr. Maynard has submitted your assessments for the placement you did complete, and your marks are excellent. He spoke highly of your initiative and involvement with the patient care."

I coloured, I couldn't help it. "Um, thanks, Dr. Anderson," I said, and I got out of her office as fast as I could.

Fuck, now I began to see why Andrew had been worried about anyone knowing that we were involved.

* * * *

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I did a solid four hours of work when I got home, to make up for time that I'd missed, and I dared to hope that I was making headway on my case studies. Pathohistology was still an issue; I really couldn't reliably tell one slide of diseased tissue from another, but there was no way around that without spending a weekend locked in the lab at uni.

Andrew had called me, pulling me away from cardiomyopathy management, and asked me to meet him and Henry later. I was nervous; this was a new and exciting variant on meeting-the-parents. More important, too, I suspected. If I was serious about Andrew, and God knows, I'd been in an ecstatically good mood all day, just from what he had said the night before, Henry was about to become part of my life, at least for a while.

I put Kelley down, lay back on my mattress, and closed my eyes. I was tingling all over still, suffused with warm happiness, and just thinking about seeing Andrew again was making me grin. Two weeks ago, he'd been a somewhat grouchy supervisor whose attention I worked hard to avoid attracting.

Now ... he was the most wonderful man I'd ever met, amazing in bed, kind and affectionate out of bed. I was turning into every bad love song in existence.

I sat up and picked up Kelley again. Back to cardiomyopathy.

* * * *

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I clambered into the back seat of Andrew's Morris and made myself tear my eyes away from him and smile at the kid sitting in the front seat. "Hi, I'm Matthew."

"Henry," he replied. "Good to meet you."

He was podgy, and looked nothing like Andrew, then he smiled back at me and there was a sudden resemblance. He looked like he was about ten or eleven years old, which was never an attractive age. Old enough to be hormonal, and too young to have worked out that you needed to be nice to people to get anywhere in life. I'd been a disgusting eleven-year-old, something that I still occasionally apologised to my mother for.

Andrew smiled at me, and we did that whole can't-take-our-eyes-off-each-other thing for a moment, then Andrew said, "You both hungry?"

"Yes!" Henry said emphatically, and I joined in the chorus.

"Starving! Where are we going?"

We went to a café just off Euston road, and I wondered why Andrew had chosen somewhere that was so down-market and dingy, until I saw the plates of food being served to the people at the next table. This was real food, solid, substantial, and filling. Genuine home cooking. I was going to have a real meal again.

Henry interrupted his recounting of playground politics to enter negotiations with Andrew as to what and how much he could order.

All of a sudden, mid-discussion of the relative merits of spaghetti Bolognese, I realised why Andrew was so patient with the med students. Henry sounded just like Nevins.

I was just eating my first mouthful of carbonara when Henry addressed me directly for the first time.

"So, Matthew, aren't you like far too young for my dad?" he said.

"Henry!" Andrew said, and I smiled disarmingly at the brat.

"Well over the age of consent, I promise you," I said to Henry. "Aren't you far too young to be harassing an adult?"

"Nope," Henry said cheerfully. "I live to aggravate. It's a lifestyle choice."

"Back in your box, Henry," Andrew said. "You expose Matthew to the worst aspects of your personality, and make him run away, and I'll persuade your mother that you need to go on a thousand calories a day diet. Understand?"

Henry looked horrified, then Andrew said, "And there's always the issue of you being at home unsupervised every afternoon. Perhaps you should come straight from school to whichever hospital I'm working at and wait for me in my office."

"Sorry, Matthew," Henry said contritely. "I'm not really a monster; it's all an act I put on to make people like me."

"I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy," I quoted at Henry, and Andrew leaned back in his chair and laughed loudly while Henry looked at me, his poor little brain obviously confused.

"Random Oscar Wilde," Andrew explained to Henry. "You, too, can come out of the British educational system with a ready supply of witticisms."

Henry nodded. "They're making me learn Shakespeare. Can you believe that? And algebra and geography and all sorts of stuff."

"What will they think of next?" Andrew said. "A solid education? You wait, the joys of trigonometry are before you, followed closely by calculus."

"Tell me about the Reformation," I said around a mouthful of pasta.

"The what?" Henry said.

"Henry the Eighth," Andrew said. "Yet another Henry with an attitude problem. I believe Matthew is winding you up."

"We're learning about the American War of Independence. Apparently it was all about tax bases and stuff like that. Nobody ever told me that before," Henry said. "People kept expecting me to know stuff about this, even the teacher. What do I know about the basis for constitutional authority to raise Federal taxes in America?"

"What else were you expected to know?" Andrew asked, and I found myself losing track of the conversation briefly as Andrew's foot slid along my calf.

"Did you know that America could never have fought the War of Independence without the French? And that England and France have been at war for, like, forever?"

All right, this was something I knew about. "We stopped fighting the French a few years ago," I pointed out. "The last time France thought long and hard about invading Britain was in 1900."

Henry stared at me. "You know this stuff?" he said. I nodded.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Andrew said, "Go on, tell us some more."

Andrew's foot was pressed against my ankle now, an invisible reminder of why we were doing this. I was getting to know his son.

"However," I added, "The relative diplomatic détente between Britain and France is not indicative of either countries' relationship with the rest of the world. Twenty years ago, French secret service agents committed an act of terrorism in New Zealand and bombed a Greenpeace ship. France seems to have learnt to stop invading other countries, and hasn't staged any significant military intrusions since it pulled out of the whole mess in Vietnam in 1954, unless you include nuking some islands it owns in the Pacific."

Andrew's eyes were on me. He smiled approvingly, and Henry groaned. "Now I know why Dad likes you," he said. "You're just like him."

Chapter Thirty Nine

Henry had bounced back from being squashed by Matthew before I'd dropped him off at Kendra's, and I'd left him concocting plans to network Matthew's laptop with my PC so they could play Counter Strike together at the weekend.

Matthew was going to call me when he'd studied his brain to a pulp, so I had some time to do domestic stuff like laundry, and unpack the boxes from my office. F had called, and I needed to take my CV into London the next day, so I had to update the damn thing and add Jackie's reference to it.

But first, before any of that stuff got done...

I sat on my bed and undid the brown-paper wrapped packages. The smell of pastels triggered waves of nostalgia. I'd bought a pack of handmade Fabriano Roma cotton paper, which had the most gorgeous tooth to it. The pastels were traditional style, thick in my hands, made in Northumbria. I'd bought fixative, too, and charcoals.

All of my real art supplies were in storage in the US, carefully wrapped and padded, left over from my marriage. I'd thought, when I followed Kendra and Henry over here, that the time of my life when I painted was over, left behind in the past, along with diapers and breastfeeding and the slammed doors and unmet expectations of married life. But here I was, spreading violet and mauve and heliotrope across paper again, smudging the colours, sliding my fingers through the pigment, layering and blending and building.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

This was making love to the paper, there was no other way to describe it, and I wanted to fill the house with these colours, cover the walls, feed them to Matthew, along with jasmine rice and Leonidas chocolate and Kilimanjaro Peaberry coffee...

I was making a mess; there were pastel smudges on my jeans, up my arms, and on the rumpled sheets, but I'd planned on changing the sheets anyway before Matthew came over, and the rest didn't matter. When the first sheet of paper was covered in colour, I put it aside and looked up at the painting that was hanging in my bedroom.

When I'd come here, it had seemed important to bring the paintings over. There was a lesson learnt in each and every one. I'd painted this one while Kendra and I had been muddling through separating. She'd been composing music, spending endless days scribbling pages and pages of notes, playing fragments of sounds over and over, while Henry and I watched from a shared bemused exclusion.

It had passed, and she'd come back to our domestic world, tired and grouchy. I'd collected her pages and pages of drafts from the recycling bin, when she wasn't watching, and painted over them.

I wasn't sure any more why I'd clung to the painting so tightly, why I needed to be reminded that obsessions were bad for relationships. Perhaps it was to remind myself why the marriage had ended.

The new piece, with its riot of colours, made me smile. I took it out into the tiny courtyard, lit by the light streaming through my kitchen window, and sprayed it with fixative, then

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

sat on the damp paving and waited for it to dry, guarding it from the sustained interest of the snails who obviously thought that Northumbrian chalk would taste good, never mind the lacquer.

It wasn't subtle, not in terms of messages from my subconscious, but I moved the green and yellow painting from my bedroom to the closet in the study and tacked the pastel sketch I'd just done in its place. I was too happy to want to think about Kendra any longer.

The washing machine was chugging away, washing the sheets that Matthew and I had trashed on Sunday night, when Matthew rang.

He was sitting on his front step when I pulled up outside his house, and he tossed his pack, laptop and a shirt on a coat hanger into the back of the car, then clambered into the front.

Neither of us said anything, there really didn't seem to be a need, then he leaned across the car and kissed me briefly. I touched his face, found his lips for another kiss, then he pulled back.

"Take me to your place, now," he said, and he did his seat belt up.

* * * *

In the shower, he turned me around and I spread my hands against the tiles, pressed my face against the hard wet ceramic, my breath coming out as a moan.

Matthew's hands were on my back; touching, sliding across soapy skin, leaving trails of desire behind them. Then

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

his arms were around my waist and his body was pressed up against mine from behind. I didn't dare speak, because if I opened my mouth, all that would come out would be pleas for him to fuck me, right there and then.

He was breathing hard, too, and we were suspended in time. I closed my eyes and held myself still. I wasn't prepared to make that sort of decision for him, or for myself, but I had no hope of making myself stop him if he slid into me.

I could feel the bead clearly as the underside of his cock pressed against the cleft of my ass and he said, "Andrew?" in a strained voice.

"Mm?" I managed to get out through clenched teeth.

"I think we need to go to bed now." Then he stepped back from me and said, "Make sure you're clean," and he was gone.

My knees almost gave way completely, leaving me clutching at the grab rail and hoping like crazy it was actually securely anchored.

Chapter Forty

The bedroom was in darkness when I walked in, towel wrapped around my hips. I skirted the end of the bed, and turned on the bedside light, took lube, gloves, and condoms out of the drawer and dropped them on the bed, then looked up.

The musical note painting was gone, and in its place, Andrew had tacked up an abstract piece, a swirl of purples and blues. Only the painting had escaped from the paper and exploded across the cream paint of the wall, leaving trails of midnight blue up to the cornice, and iris purple tracking down to floor level. There were deep greens in it, too, and splashes of red, colours so intense I could taste them.

It was wild and intoxicating, and I sat on the end of the bed and stared at it. I didn't need anyone to interpret this one for me; this was the exultation that had been on Andrew's face that morning when he'd fucked me. This was the most intense visual description of pleasure I'd ever seen, and it left me breathless.

That it was on the wall, not on some giant canvas, amplified the impact. This was not going to be hung in someone's lounge room or exhibited in a gallery. This was art that belonged to this bedroom, and to whomever Andrew trusted enough to bring in here. It belonged to us.

I was still sitting on the bed, staring at the wall, when Andrew came in, towel around his waist, impressive erection straining at the thick fabric. To his credit, he didn't ask if I liked the art, just sat beside me and stared at it, too.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Is it permanent?" I finally asked.

"Kind of," Andrew said. "I've put a coat of sealant over it, but it's a workable lacquer. I think stable, rather than permanent, is a good description. Why?"

"Because I want to fuck you up against it," I said. "And if the paint's wet or whatever, I can't do that."

"It's pastel, not paint," Andrew said, taking my hand. "And I'd love you to fuck me up against it."

I lifted his hand to my mouth and kissed his knuckles. There was pigment ingrained in the creases. Seconds later, we were on the floor, kissing so hard that our teeth clicked, grinding against each other, and rolling over until one of my knees got wedged under the edge of the bed.

Up until we got into the shower, I'd thought I wasn't particularly horny, after the amazing sex of the past twenty-four hours, but it hadn't taken much to persuade me otherwise. Now, it felt like I hadn't come for a fortnight, and that I'd go crazy if I didn't get some release soon.

There wasn't any doubt that Andrew felt the same way, not with the way he was writhing around on top of me. I looked hopefully under the side of the bed, just in case lube and gloves had magically appeared amongst the dust sheep, but there wasn't any, so when Andrew lifted his mouth off mine, breathing hard, I said, "On the bed, facedown on a towel."

Andrew was so gorgeous like that, on his stomach, his hands kneading at the thick quilt underneath him. His eyes were closed, and there was such a look of peace on his face,

where it was turned sideways against the bedding, that I didn't want to disturb him.

Then my eyes tracked down his back to his arse, so tempting with one leg hitched up on the bed, ready for me, that the feeling passed, and I settled beside him, stroking his back gently.

There was fine hair on his lower back and across his buttocks, and I ran my hand across the skin, smoothing the hair, and relishing the feel of the beads of sweat that sprang up as I touched him. One day, I'd wax him, just for the feel of the skin afterwards.

I was getting used to the way he let go as soon as I touched him, just like he did this time. Tension I hadn't noticed was there ebbed away, and he let out a long sigh. I kissed his shoulder and caressed his buttock, then knelt up beside him. "Wait for me," I said.

I'd never rimmed without latex, either a dam or a slit-open condom, before, and I carefully switched off the part of my mind that had done micro. If Andrew could let go of conscious thought that completely, so could I.

He tasted clean, of soap and skin, when I leaned forward and licked my tongue down the crack of his arse. He shivered, I felt it clearly, and said, "Oh, fuck..." as I rimmed my tongue across his skin.

This was different without latex; I could press my tongue in, which made Andrew flail around briefly, and suck effectively, which obviously felt good, too, if the yelling was any indication. There was nothing like an appreciative partner. I spread his cheeks with my hands...

He thwacked my leg once, quite hard, and I figured that was as good as any stupid safeword. When I looked up at him, he was clenching the quilt so tightly his knuckles were white and he said, "Fuck, Matthew, I haven't got a chance of waiting if you're gonna keep doing that."

I lay down beside him and stroked his arm gently. "And you were so polite before," I murmured, then I grinned at him.

He grinned back at me. "Seemed that doing what you told me, and waiting for you, was more important than trying to remember to say 'please'."

"Of course you're right," I murmured, then I kissed him, long and slow, kissing all of his mouth, making sure he could taste himself.

He moaned and whimpered and trembled on the bed, and it took me a moment to realise he was coming, even though neither of us were touching his cock.

He didn't meet my eyes when I lifted my mouth from his, just kept his gaze lowered, so I touched his chin, lifting his face. He lifted his eyes, and I said, "I've never had someone come just from being kissed before. That was amazing."

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and it was moments like this that made me hate being a dom. Part of the dynamics included setting challenges for the other person, and I always consciously tried to chose something that was reasonable, but obviously he had been more turned on than I'd realised.

"Don't apologise," I said, and it came out as an order.

There was a flicker of something in Andrew's eyes then, laughter perhaps, and it reassured me. I said, "I'm going to fuck you anyway."

He placed his hands carefully, one on a moss green patch, the other on canary yellow, and I stood behind him pulling a glove on. I rubbed my fingers together, warming the lube a little, making Andrew wait, then pushed two fingers into him slowly.

He was relaxed; the only tension in his body was in his arms; biceps and forearms taut, holding him steady; and my fingers slid into him easily. He was open enough I could have just fucked him, but that wasn't what we were there for.

He was making tiny noises now, involuntary responses that grew louder when I added a third finger. Fuck, I would have loved to fist him like this, but it wasn't good practice, not unless he was pumped full of drugs and held steady by suspension wrist cuffs. Three fingers would have to be enough for both of us.

I was so focused on what I was doing, twisting my wrist to press my thumb against his perineum, working my fingertips inside him to give him maximum sensation, that it took me a little while to realise he was talking to himself.

"Yes ... please, must ... can't," he was muttering under his breath. "Need ... must, you..."

"And you shall have me," I murmured, leaning forward so my face was pressed against his neck, my cock against one of his buttocks.

He was trembling again and I reached around his waist with my other hand to stroke his cock. He groaned, and I

knew I'd misjudged again, he was much closer than I'd anticipated. "Right now," I added, and his moan was relieved. Neither of us wanted him to fail again.

I withdrew my fingers, rolled a condom on, lubed myself up quickly, and moved to stand behind Andrew.

It was a damn good thing we were the same height, it made this so much easier, and I only had to bend my knees a little.

The bottom bead caught and I had to push a little harder than usual to drag the bead in. He cried out, sweet and sharp, and I eased myself into him.

With us both standing the angles were completely different and I had no control over them, but it felt amazing. I rocked into him, no finesse, just his weight holding me in as deep as I could go, and reached around to stroke his cock.

It took a moment for us to establish a rhythm, then we were rocking together slowly; him braced against the wall, my weight pressing against his back. We couldn't sustain it for long, not without at least one of us cramping, but this wasn't going to take long, not when it felt like this.

I closed my eyes, the colours on the wall burnt into my memory so strongly I could see them with my eyes shut, and bit down on Andrew's shoulder without meaning to.

I tasted blood, metallic and hot, and it made me come.

Andrew slumped in my arms, completely drained, and I held him as well as I could, pulling out of him too roughly in my attempt to stop him from falling down.

He was heavy. We staggered backward to the bed, and it was a huge relief to be able to let us both fall safely into the

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

quilt. Andrew looked utterly exhausted in my arms, and when I looked up, there was come streaking the painting.

It took effort to drag the quilt out from underneath Andrew and pull it over him, but I managed. I left him, already asleep, and did a quick tidy up, picking up the damp towels, getting rid of the condom, turning lights off downstairs, checking the security system was on.

I didn't touch the wall, concerned that if I tried to wipe it clean, I'd disturb the colours.

Chapter Forty One

A strange beeping woke me, and it was Matthew's turn to kiss me and say, "It's just the alarm on my phone. I've got to get up, you go back to sleep."

Going back to sleep ... Now there was an unusual idea.

I didn't go back to sleep, just stayed curled up comfortably under the covers, watching Matthew bring me a cup of coffee, wearing nothing but his shirt. If only all room service was this hot.

He let me pull him back down onto the bed for a smooch, then he said, "I have to go to St. Georges now. I don't think that sleeping with all my supervisors, just to make sure I'm never in trouble for being late, is a viable option, so I'd better turn up on time."

I let him go reluctantly and said, "The elevators at St. Georges are well-maintained, so don't plan on using that excuse either."

He pulled on his trousers, no underwear underneath, and my eyes must have widened because he grinned at me. "You've worked there?"

I shook my head and reached for my coffee. "No, but Tim, my ex, does. Watch out for a wandering vegan festooned in animal rights buttons."

"Think my supervisor is a Dr. Clarke. That's not him, is it?" Matthew asked, sitting on the bed to put his socks on.

"Not him," I said. "But you'll be able to spot him in the cafeteria; he'll be the only person eating a lentil sandwich."

"Gross," Matthew said, wrinkling his nose and making me laugh.

He came back into the bedroom a moment later, shaving cream on his face. "You are kidding, aren't you? About the lentil sandwich?"

I shook my head. "Only person I've ever met who believed that you could make a pancake solely with rice flour and soy milk.

"You can't?"

"No, that makes glue, not batter, and if you cook it, you have cooked glue," I told him.

Matthew disappeared back into the bathroom again, making 'yuckyunck' noises.

It was quiet when he'd left, and I stayed in bed while my coffee cooled, enjoying my mini-holiday while it lasted.

At nine, my phone rang, and it was Human Resources at London, asking me to bring in my CV that afternoon, and passing on an invitation from Olivia Holland, the senior oncology consultant, to visit her in her office.

I'd met Olivia several times at Jackie's house, and knew her well enough to know that she had a passion for dachshunds, merlot, and Monty Python, having spent more than one boozy dinner listening to her and Jackie's wife tell scurrilous tales about when Jackie was a young and ill-informed house physician.

She barreled down the depressing grey corridor, dodging wonky chairs and abandoned trolleys of files, waving at me. "Andrew!" she called out, her voice booming. "Good to see

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

you when I'm not blind drunk," she shouted, slapping me hard on the back.

"Thanks for seeing me," I said to her, and she clamped her hand on my elbow and steered me down the corridor, whether I wanted to go there or not.

"Not a problem," she said, pushing me into a great vault of a room and slamming the door after herself.

There was a desk in one corner, with the ubiquitous plastic chairs around it, and I sat down and stared at the ceiling with disbelief. Whatever the room had been before, the ducting, plumbing, wiring and scaffolding had been left undisturbed and merely painted white in a vain attempt to disguise it all.

"In the fifties they had some kind of hypobaric chamber in here," Olivia said. "Not sure why they've never removed all the plumbing for it, just means I have the largest office in the hospital." She grinned at me. "I couldn't believe it when I heard you were looking for a job here. I even phoned that Jackson bastard to find out why he'd fired you. Turns out he hadn't, admin had."

"Yep," I said. "Comes from being a union agitator."

"That'd be the problems with that fuckwit Seagate, wouldn't it?" Olivia said, and I just loved her for it. "Couldn't quite believe it when the morons in admin here decided they wanted him on staff; the man is a lawsuit looking for somewhere to happen."

"Perhaps they're insisting he pays all his own malpractice insurance. Or perhaps it's just that he's the best damn nephrologist I've ever seen," I said.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

Olivia harrumphed. "Then the word comes down from on high that not only are we getting that aggressive little bastard, but he was bringing you and some other troublemaker with him, and that someone had found a secret supply of money to fund a new registrar's position. I've been campaigning for another registrar for years."

"It's that simple?" I asked. "I've got a job here?"

Olivia leaned across the desk and held out her hand. "Welcome to London. Don't drink the water, hitchhike, or eat any food from a roadside stall. Of course, I need to explain that you won't actually be solely oncology; immunology, cardiology and rheumatology all want a piece of the action."

"General slave?" I asked, and I could feel myself grinning.

"Yep," Olivia said. "Guess they'll give you a resident eventually. Come on, I'll walk you around the wards you'll mostly be working on."

* * * *

I came home with my head full, a jumble of new faces and labyrinthine Victorian wards, overlaid with the universal constants of hospitals; the smell of bad food and isopropyl alcohol.

The lights were on when I put my key in the door, and I could hear music. Matthew was accompanying the stereo in the kitchen, singing badly, and as I didn't recognise the music, it must have been one of his CDs. He appeared as I closed the door behind myself.

"Hey," he said, kissing my cheek. "Hope it's all right for me to be here, even though you hadn't invited me."

"I gave you a key," I said, and I touched his face for a moment, suddenly blown away by the enormity of what his being here meant. "You can come around any time you want, as often as you want."

We kissed for a while, gentle and undemanding, and Matthew smiled at me. "I'm cooking; hope you're going to like it."

It had been years since I'd come home from work and found someone cooking for me; it was something Tim and I had never done. Tim thought food was a temptation to be denied, and I thought food was like sex. You could get along without it, or with really basic food, for quite a while, but it was hard to be happy unless you had plenty on hand, just in case you got hungry.

"Smells great," I said. "What're we eating?"

"Nothing fancy, just stir fry with a tin of satay mix in it," Matthew said. "I found stuff in your cupboards. Have you been doing job interviews? You've got your best shirt on."

I was kind of surprised that Matthew had observed enough of my meagre wardrobe to work out which was my least stained shirt, but he obviously had. "I've got a job," I said. "At London Hospital. No idea when I start or anything like that."

"Is it a good job?" Matthew said, grinning with delight, making me grin, too. God, I just couldn't take my eyes off him.

"It's a fucking brilliant job," I said. "I'll be a palliative care registrar, kind of floating all over the hospital, though I'm guessing that oncology will think they own me. It's far better

than grinding my days away in general medicine; this is specialising in something that I really want to do."

I flopped down onto the couch and Matthew straddled my lap. "Great!" he said, and I speculated about what would happen if I started undressing him. Guess we wouldn't get dinner, though. "Any disadvantages?" he asked. "Or is this a dream job?"

"Ihavetositmyphysician'sexams," I said quickly, hoping that it wouldn't be so bad if I didn't think about it.

"That's not good, is it?" Matthew asked, and I shook my head.

"Think both of us are going to be studying hard, not just you," I said.

He wrinkled his nose at me and said, "I won't distract you, if you don't distract me."

I squeezed his ass, and chuckled, then slid a hand around to unzip his fly, knowing he had nothing on underneath.

"Think you should borrow some of my shorts then, because I'm kinda obsessing about your cock at the moment."

Chapter Forty Two

There was a sustained shout from downstairs, and the sound of glass shattering, but I didn't run down the stairs to see if anyone was hurt. I'd have to actually care for that happen.

I hated my housemates at that moment. The stereo was so loud that the floor boards were humming faintly, I hadn't been able to use either loo for a couple of hours, the stairs were so packed with people that just getting out of my room was problematic, and people I didn't know kept opening my door every few minutes, looking for somewhere to fuck.

It was Heidi's welcome home party, and the cops had already been called twice.

There was another crash, clearly audible through my headphones. There was no way I could study through this, and I certainly wasn't going to be able to sleep. There wasn't enough credit on my phone to actually call Andrew, so I texted him, 'please call me.'

I had intended studying, to make sure I wasn't falling behind, really hit the books hard, then go over to Andrew's tomorrow evening for a meal and some silent sex, but I was going to fucking kill the next person who opened my bedroom door.

The door opened and I shouted out, "Fuck off!" to the person who'd opened it without even looking up from my pathohistology text.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and I took off my headphones and put it against my ear hard.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

It was Andrew, though I couldn't hear him clearly enough to know what he was saying.

"Can you come and get me?" I shouted into the phone.

I caught his answer. "On my way," he shouted back.

I packed my textbooks, laptop, and some clothes into my pack, then looked around the room to see if there was anything else worth stealing there. Only my porn, I guessed, but I didn't feel like lugging a carton of muscle mags over to Andrew's, so I hid them under my dirty clothes.

I rolled the futon up to discourage people from fucking on it and stuck a sign saying, 'STAY THE FUCK OUT' on my door, then pushed my way through the press of bodies and down the stairs.

The party had spilled out onto the footpath, too, and down the street, so I worked my way through the crowd and up the street to somewhere that Andrew would be able to see me.

Exactly how good an idea this had been became obvious when, just as the Morris rattled to a halt beside the kerb, a panda car came down the street and pulled up where the crowd had spilled out onto the street.

Andrew was grinning as he leaned across and unlocked the passenger door.

I tossed my pack onto the back seat, put my laptop down more carefully, and climbed into the car.

"Hey, babe," he said, and I leaned across and kissed him.

"Thanks for this, they're being the housemates from hell at the moment," I said.

He kissed me again. "I'm not going to complain, not if I get to sleep with you tonight."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

I had to admit, it was a benefit that had occurred to me, too, so I just grinned back at him.

He didn't the start the car again; instead he took hold of my hand, looking serious all of a sudden. "You don't have to say yes, but how about going back and getting the rest of your stuff?"

I could see by the streetlight that his hand was stained with paint or something. "You want me to move in with you?" I asked. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "You've been at my place the past five nights. I know you planned on being at your place to study, but it doesn't look like that's going to work. I think, if we set some boundaries, especially with Henry, you'll get more study done at my place."

I squeezed his hand, and he lifted my hand up and kissed my knuckles. "This is going to sound horribly needy and desperate and just plain embarrassing, but I was really missing you this evening, and was not looking forward to sleeping without you."

I hugged him and said, "If you think I'm not going to drive you crazy, I'd love to move in with you."

The police had dispersed some of the hordes of party-goers, which made emptying my room into the back of the Morris easier. I left Andrew lugging boxes down the stairs and went and found Jeff number one. He was in the kitchen, hanging onto some girl while she was sick in the sink, and I tapped his shoulder.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"Yeah," he said, and I was glad the police had confiscated the stereo and the noise had dropped enough that I could hear him clearly.

"I'm moving out," I said, and I took the money I'd just borrowed from Andrew out of my pocket.

"What?" he said.

"Here's a month's rent," I said. "I'm leaving my futon behind, too, the household can have it."

Heidi came over and said, "You're leaving, Matthew?" She took the money out of Jeff's hand and put it in her own pocket. "Because of tonight? The party?"

I shook my head. "No, because Andrew just asked me to move in with him."

She hugged me tightly.

I didn't really own much, not without the futon, and Andrew had got most of it in the car before I'd extricated myself from Heidi's clutches.

He met me on the stairs, his arms full of the sheets of revision notes and anatomy sketches that had covered my walls.

"I don't really need to take them," I said. "Your place is too lovely to clutter up with sheets of scribble."

He shrugged, crinkling the papers, and said, "You, of all people, must know that I'm casual about what happens to my walls. If I can paint on them, you can cover them in revision notes."

Henry was sprawled on the couch, watching something on the TV that involved a lot of gunfire, when we arrived, and he barely glanced up when I said, "Hello."

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

About five minutes later, when I walked into the house, trailing an armful of my clothes, he appeared in the doorway to the lounge room. "You moving in?" he asked me, looking at the bulging pack in my arms.

"Yep," I said, and he nodded and went back to sprawling on the couch.

"Cool," he said, picking up the remote control.

I carried the stuff in my arms up to Andrew's room and added it to the mound on the bedroom floor. "That's the last of it," I said to Andrew, and I sat down on the bed, unbearably tired all of a sudden.

Chapter Forty Three

When I woke up on Saturday morning, the other side of the bed was empty, but there was a reassuring mound of junk at the foot of the bed. Matthew had definitely moved in.

I pulled a robe on and wandered downstairs. Henry was still in bed, but the lights were on and the coffee percolator had been started. I poured myself a mug and headed back upstairs.

Matthew was in the study, a strip of fabric tied around his head to hold his hair back, textbook propped beside his laptop on the desk, chewing his lip in thought.

"Hey, babe," he said when he looked up. "Chronic occlusive disease?"

"Pump them full of pentoxifylline," I said without thinking. "Want some more coffee?"

He shook his head and went back to peering alternately at his text, and his laptop screen. I left him to it.

Henry and I spent the day walking the Roman wall through London, detouring down side streets, finishing up with a raid on HMV on Oxford St. on the way home.

I left Henry slouched on the couch, alternately lamenting the amount of exercise he'd been conned into taking and gloating over his new DVDs, and went upstairs.

Matthew was exactly where I'd left him. The only way I could tell he'd moved at all was that there were two empty plates beside his elbow on the desk, and that he wasn't in his bathrobe anymore.

He pushed himself back from the desk and took his headphones off when I opened the door, and stretched luxuriously. "What's the time?" he asked, and I thought that he looked damn hot in a 'Hello Kitty' T-shirt and a pair of my sweat pants.

"After three," I said. "Did you wake up feeling particularly gay this morning?" I asked, gesturing at his T-shirt.

He chuckled and wriggled his eyebrows at me. "Probably, considering where I woke up. My sister gave me this T-shirt as part of some kind of campaign to appall our mum, so I'm quite fond of it. If it's three, then I can stop; I've done eight hours, and I don't think I can look at another page of signs and symptoms without screaming."

He stood up and stretched from side to side, with alarming crunching noises from his vertebrae, then wrapped his arms around my neck and kissed me.

When we surfaced again, he said, "So what domestic goodness do you have planned for the rest of the day?"

"Hmm," I said. "Laundry. Food shopping for the week. Goofing around with Henry. What about you?"

"Laundry, too," he said, pouting. "Did you know that every single item of clothing I own, apart from this T-shirt, is dirty?"

I slid my hands under the sweats he was wearing, at the back, and found bare skin. "Oh, I approve," I murmured. "If all of your clothing being dirty explains why you haven't been wearing shorts, I don't think you should do any laundry."

"Not having any boxers is one thing," Matthew said, and I had a really good grope while he was hugging me. "But, having no clean shirts or trousers for clinical is something

completely different. Now, let go of my arse so I can go and load the washing machine."

I let go of him and said, "So, you planning on telling your mom you've moved in with me?"

He pushed past me and disappeared into the bedroom, reappearing a moment later with arms full of clothes. "Rang her today," he said, and he galloped down the stairs, dropping socks and shorts behind him as he went.

I followed him down the stairs more sedately, picking up his washing as I went, and he reappeared at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, my God," he said. "Your washing machine has buttons and dials and gauges and things."

"I'll show you how to use it." I handed him the pile of washing when I got to the laundry. "What did she say?"

"Have you met any nice doctors for your sister?" Matthew quoted. "I told her about F, and the other doctors I'd met, and said you were the only sane one out there."

"Your sister wants to date a mechanic," I said, adding detergent to the machine and starting it. "They work decent hours and earn more. Hell, considering the hours I work, Kendra is better off than me. Mind you, she's obsessive/compulsive about music."

"I'm telling Mom you said that," Henry called out from the living room, before appearing in the hallway. His eyes boggled at Matthew's T-shirt, and I slapped him on the back.

"Get used to redefining masculinity," I said cheerfully, and he groaned and went back to the TV.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

When I'd lugged the first armful of groceries in, I dropped the bags in the kitchen and went upstairs to investigate the shouts of glee.

Henry and Matthew were in the study, Henry at the desk, Matthew on the floor, with cables snaking between his laptop and my PC. "Look out behind you!" Henry shouted, and the speakers on the PC boomed with gunfire.

Obviously, 'Hello Kitty' T-shirts didn't interfere with Matthew's eligibility as a fellow gamer. I went back downstairs to carry the rest of the shopping in by myself.

That night, when I was curled up under the quilt, my head on Matthew's chest, listening to his slow deep breathing, our fingers entwined, he said, "Andrew?"

"Hmm?"

"I have a problem," he said, and I could hear that he was trying not to laugh.

"Okay," I said. "And that'd be?"

"It seems that I'm very good at negotiating having safe sex, but I actually have no idea how to ask if we can stop," Matthew said as he squeezed my hand.

"Guess you just did," I said contentedly.

Chapter Forty Four

London Hospital didn't have a cardiology special on the menu in the cafeteria, but they did do a killer omelette, thick and substantial, obviously filled with whatever was left over in the kitchen from the day before.

I got stuck into my omelette, keeping a close eye on the doors, watching for Matthew. Neither of us had very long for lunch, but it was always a good thing when we overlapped.

This was one of the lucky times, and I was only halfway through my lunch when he appeared, wearing green scrubs, hair still in a cap, laughing over his shoulder to Clarissa, who was walking behind him, carrying a laden tray, too.

I waved a fork at them, and Matthew grinned at me and pushed his way through the crowd to plunk his tray on the table opposite me. Clarissa sat down and Matthew leaned across the table to kiss me quickly.

"God, I'm starving," he said, picking his knife and fork up. He was eating the omelette, too.

"Guess what?" I said to him, reaching into the folder that was on the table beside my plate.

I handed him the printout from the MRCP examination result page.

He scanned it quickly, and grinned when he found my name, then practically leapt across the table to hug me.

"Yes!" he shouted. "You did it!"

I hugged him and kept hugging, and he kissed me. Life didn't get any sweeter than this.

"Who have you told?" he asked me, clambering back into his own seat and giving Clarissa a chance to congratulate me, too.

"No one," I said. "I'll call Henry now, tell him, then drop into F's office and leave a message for him."

He was grinning at me across the table, and we were having one of those sentimental moments that made Henry make vomiting noises if he caught us, when Clarissa elbowed Matthew.

"Eat up, kid," she said. "We've got six minutes until we're back in pre-op."

Matthew bolted down his food, but I could still feel his glee. When he pushed his chair back from the table, I said, "What time tonight?"

He glanced at Clarissa, who shrugged and finished her orange juice as she stood up. "Think the list runs until seven," she said.

"Eight thirty," Matthew said. "Can I call you to be collected? Will you be finished by then, too?"

I nodded. "Yep, I should be home by seven. Give me a ring."

He disappeared, dumping his tray onto the waiting trolley, and merging into the milling people around the main hallway.

London Hospital didn't have a car park, so Matthew couldn't bring the Morris into work. However, because I spent so much time at the hospices the hospital serviced, not only did I get one of the highly-prized parking bays, but the hospital provided a Smart car.

Henry had shrieked with laughter when he'd first seen it, and we all called it Mickey, based on the resemblance of the emergency vehicle lights to mouse ears. It looked absurd, but I had a pass to take it into central London, and I'd done the emergency driving course to be able to use the lights. I'd never used the lights, but I parked on the sidewalk constantly.

My phone rang as I stood up, and I slid my tray onto the trolley and said, "On my way. Just give your wife another dose of morphine immediately, and I'll be with you in twenty minutes."

* * * *

Matthew was standing beside my car bay at the hospital, slouched shoulders underneath his jacket, and I unlocked the passenger door for him.

"Hey," he said, leaning across to kiss me. "Thought you were going to finish at seven?"

"She died," I said. Matthew would know that meant I had to stay, at least until the mortuary ambulance turned up.

Matthew nodded, and he looked tired by the interior light of the car. "Let's go home," he said.

There was food in the freezer, curries and lasagnas, hinting at a level of domestic organisation that I had not previously managed to achieve, and I tossed a pack of pasta and sauce into the microwave and hit the shower.

Matthew opened the shower curtain, held out a glass of wine for me, and then kicked the lid of the toilet shut and sat down on it. I drank a big gulp of wine and put the glass down

beside the basin, then went back to washing myself. I didn't really feel like talking, but the company was good, and when I glanced back over my shoulder when I reached for the shampoo, he was leaning back against the cistern, idly rubbing at his cock through his jeans.

"Turn the taps off," he said, and I did, then reached for the towel he held out for me.

The bed was unmade, and I pushed aside the bunched-up sheet and duvet and spread the towel out, aware I wasn't dry and was still dripping shower water on the bed, but I didn't care, not with the weight of Matthew dipping the mattress beside me.

"Close your eyes," he said, and the drawer beside the bed slid open with a scrape. I let out a long breath, closing my eyes and letting my body relax.

There was a rustle of packaging, and the snap of latex, and while my breathing was smooth and slow, my heart rate had picked up.

"God, I need this," I said, and he kissed the back of my neck.

"I know," he said, and his tongue licked drops of water from my shoulder and two lubed fingers slid into me.

I needed him, too, in a way that still scared me a little; belly-twisting, heart-pounding need. It was more than that moment, what he did to me; it was everything.

He pulled his hand back, slid it forward again; increased pressure and the best kind of sting. I was distantly aware I was rambling at him, telling him how much I loved him, until he leaned forward and kissed my cheek.

Bad Case of Loving You
by Laney Cairo

"I know," he repeated, with emphasis. "And I love you, too. You ready for all of me?"

Always, but I couldn't tell him right then. I was too busy breathing and feeling to speak, but I would always love him.

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